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“WHITENESS IS IN THE WAY OF SEEING:” NARRATIVIZING MIDDLE SCHOOL
STUDENTS’ INTERSECTIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF WHITENESS IN LITERACY
INSTRUCTION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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to the faculty of the
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of
THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
at
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by
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ABSTRACT

“WHITENESS IS IN THE WAY OF SEEING”: NARRATIVIZING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS’ INTERSECTIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF WHITENESS IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Scott L. Moore

Structured by the theoretical framework of intersectionality, this comparative case study traced perceptions of Whiteness in literacy instruction by three queer, transgender or gender expansive (TGE), or cisgender female, Black and/or Latinx middle school students. The study addresses significant gaps in research, which has rarely explored the valence of all aspects of the intersectional identities of this population of middle school literacy learners and tends to perpetuate erasure by adopting single- or multiple-axis lenses to students’ identities.

The study was structured by a transferable curriculum crafted around questions, arts-based expressions, and narrative inquiry to support participants’ narrativizing about their intersectional identities, their experiences with Whiteness and perceptions of it inside and outside of school, and their imaginings about what liberatory literacy instruction would look and feel like. The curriculum-as-method demanded researcher autoethnography throughout the study by way of personal narratives. As intersectionality necessitates locality via storytelling, the study sought idea- and question-generation rather than generalizable results. The re-storied narratives-as-results were localized, and in interaction with the reader, speak to the three axes (horizontal, vertical, and transversal) of comparative case study. The study sought to create spaces for participants and researcher alike to creatively express themselves, curiosity, and freedom dreaming in the pursuit of liberating and abolitionist literacy instruction. In addressing existing gaps

in research in terms of participants, frameworks, and methods, this study serves as a call to action in the fields of education and literacy studies and its two-pronged process can be modified and implemented by other educators and researchers.

Keywords: intersectionality, Whiteness, comparative case study, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, freedom dreaming, abolitionist teaching

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This dissertation synthesizes decades' worth of stories, all of which made essential contributions to this project.

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My passions for learning, literacy, and justice stretch back long before I can even remember, though several influential teachers jump to mind: Librarians at the Brownell Library in Essex Junction, Vermont; teachers Delia Clark, Jane Vossler, Jane Goodman, and Robert Brown; athletic coaches and teammates in middle and high school, including George Huntington; life-changing college professors, mentors, and peers including Jonathan D. Katz, Seth Clark Silberman, Moira Fradinger, Megan Sinnott, Elizabeth Alexander, Linda Anderson, Margaret Homans, and Kathleen Cleaver; colleagues and friends at Teach For America and at the Middle School Quality Initiative who enhanced my drive for educational justice; professor and mentor Michael Weinraub; and Dr. Bernard Gassaway in the CITE-Saint Rose school leadership program.

I am forever indebted to my family, both given and chosen. The personal growth and ongoing evolution that explicitly grounded this project would not have been possible without this village, beginning first and foremost with my mom and dad, my sisters Alison and Angie, and my nieces Abby and Zoe. Three brilliant people – my mom and

original teacher Laurie Krywanczyk, my aunt and lifelong educator Suzanne Moore, and quintessential freedom dreamer Anika Brown – pored over early drafts of this, posing questions to nurture new possibilities that I could not have imagined on my own.

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I am profoundly grateful for my middle school’s administrative team, staff, and teachers, who are fueled by a fierce love for our students and who encourage me to engage in the necessary work explored in this study every single day. Benjamin Lev and Shakira Lleras have transformed my vision of leadership and my understanding of what it means to be in community.

My love, Angela, powers the heartbeat at the core of this project. Every day with her exemplifies joy; she has taught me what homeplace is. She and our furry rascals, Bechdel and Wilde, snuggled me through countless hours of drafting and reading.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives.”

-Audre Lorde (1982)

These opening sentences signify the “both/and” necessary to resist binary thinking, a resistance at the core of any constructivist and critical approach (DiAngelo, 2018). As Audre Lorde’s statement in 1982 was firmly grounded in her positioning as a Black lesbian feminist, this quote is not exactly for me (a White, queer, trans person); *and* it is necessary that I honor and engage with Lorde’s body of work in my life generally and in building out frameworks for this paper (Lorde, 1982). The [hi]stories (bracketed per this study’s decision to center stories, as discussed shortly) that follow are not mine and yet are somewhat mine; I have ancestors, some by blood and others by legacy, in various positionings throughout these narratives - *and* I must honor and engage with these [hi]stories in order to comprehensively examine the contexts in which this study was done. I have very few answers (and none on my own), *and* I can continuously deepen and expand my own inquiry.

As me-as-researcher (a part of and influence upon dynamics with participants and having executive power over each part of the study) and me-as-Assistant Principal (a part of and influence upon the contexts of the study), I have personal and professional stakes in this project that warrant close reading and autoethnography extending beyond researcher reflexivity. I recently found an autobiography I wrote in 2011, when I was teaching new teachers about the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings and about Sonia Nieto’s (2003) chapter “Teaching as

*Autobiography.” In line with author Glennon Doyle’s rationale for publishing three memoirs in the span of just over a decade (including updated content and shifting lenses fueled by new questions and possibilities), I am rewriting here parts of the autobiography I first crafted in 2011 (Egan, 2020). Claudia Rankine (2020) describes true conversation, particularly about race, as “complicated mess” **and** as a worthy pursuit; I seek the messiness of such encounters with my own narratives and with others’ (p. 39). What can these conversations mean - or do? There is no clear pathway towards a liberation that has never yet existed; anyone invested in pursuing that liberation has no choice but to listen, learn from ancestors, and wonder our way forward, encounter by encounter. As a White educator, researcher, and individual, every movement leader - particularly Black and Indigenous leaders in the realms of culturally responsive or anti-racist teaching, abolitionism, restorative justice, freedom dreaming, and the arts - leads me to one critical component of this process: Continuous self-examination. I ground myself there in narrative, doing the work throughout (and within) this project that the project itself advocates and demands. In teaching, coaching, and leadership I cannot ask others to do what I have not done (am not doing) myself; the vulnerability of ongoing self-interrogation is inherent in the pursuit of abolitionist teaching and education.*

To be clear from the start: Whatever others or audiences may expect or demand of me, particularly as a queer and trans person, I do not and cannot speak for anyone but myself. I do not presume that I could or should represent any stories in these personal narratives but my own.

Citing Lorde as a foundation for this study demands an intersectional theoretical framework. The study, implemented as a potentially transferable curriculum the impact of which I reflect upon throughout this paper, leveraged a comparative case study design with three, queer, transgender or gender expansive (TGE), or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx students as participants, each loosely representing a case. The curriculum surfaced and traced participants’ perceptions of Whiteness in their lives outside of and inside of the classroom, including in literacy instruction, at the public middle school in Harlem where I am Assistant Principal. In doing so, the study explored how participants’ intersectional identities inform how, when, and where they read Whiteness within, prior to, and outside of the context of their (in-person or virtual, as this study is situated in the

midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States) Humanities classrooms - and participants' visions for liberatory literacy instruction. Through a process of data analysis described in detail in Chapter 3, the results of the study consisted of narratives re-storied to enact the locality demanded by intersectional approaches and the unboundedness recognized by comparative case study.

Purpose of the Study

The decision to work specifically with queer, TGE, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx middle schoolers was central and purposeful. Advocating for this specific population of students as an educator, particularly in the realm of literacy, is often misunderstood as requiring the accumulation of generalizable knowledge rather than posing and generating questions. Only a thoroughly intersectional approach in the framing and implementation of the proposed study, which will be illuminated in Chapter 2, can account for students' full stories and thereby resist centering knowledge-production. This approach serves as a refusal to reduce students to unitary aspects of their identities or assume unity within any given category. It represents a shift from an essentializing approach to this population (from viewing "them" as static) to an expansive approach based on listening to stories, wondering, and envisioning liberation.

One significant reason to focus on this population using this framework in the United States in School Year 2020-2021 derives from these realities of differential, material experience on the basis of categorical, intersecting identities. For just one example, based on United States Census data on wages, women (as a single-axis category) are paid 82 cents per every dollar paid to men (as a single-axis category); when

broken down into multiple axes by gender and race, White women make 79 cents, Black women 62 cents, and Latinx women 54 cents per every dollar paid to White men (Bleiweis, 2020). Women do not all have the same experience, nor do they face the same oppressions. These categorical, material differences offer insight into both the primacy of intersectional approaches and why this study investigates participants' experiences with, perceptions of, and feelings about Whiteness.

Through an intersectional lens, Whiteness can be identified as a dominant and constructed category that is enacted and read in various ways (physically, culturally, ideologically, and more). Whiteness is simultaneously a personal racial identity, experience, and bias (personal); contextually determined patterns of behavior, communication, and customs (interpersonal); and a system of dominance and supremacy that pervades all contexts (systemic). As it is grounded in the history of race as a social production with no essence, Whiteness exists through interactive perception of it and has wielded continuously-shifting definitions over time in the context of the United States - **and** it continues to have real power and impact due to its hegemonic dominance and the embeddedness of White supremacy in this country's founding and continued identity (DiAngelo, 2018; Love, 2019).

The study's focus on these specific participants' perceptions of Whiteness in literacy instruction derived from the recognition that, for Youth of Color, obstacles pervade school settings. Almost all academic data are collected and shared through single-identity lenses, including standardized test scores and disaggregated subgroup data per the mandates of No Child Left Behind – which also notably tend to omit LGBTQ+ subgroups, conflate gender with sex, and reduce gender to a binary (Eckes & Swando,

2009). From this single-identity lens (of race) emerge massive inequities: In United States schools in 2019, Black and Latinx youth faced significant academic barriers including bias and racially inequitable discipline systems, with Black students being three times more likely to face suspension than White students (Nelson & Lind, 2015). LGBTQ+ students endure devastating academic realities such as disproportionate drop-out, harassment, bullying, assault, and suspension rates (Blackburn, Clark, & Martino, 2016).

The stakes for students who find themselves at the intersections of multiple, marginalized identities are exponentially higher. Within LGBTQ+ communities, lived experiences and identities vary tremendously based on these intersections (Strauss, 2017). For example, the little intersectional research available illustrates that LGBTQ+ youth who also experience foster care are at significantly higher risk of juvenile criminalization and homelessness (Price et al., 2019). LGBTQ+ Youth of Color similarly find themselves facing intersectional challenges in schools. Only 11% of queer and gender expansive Students of Color believe their racial or ethnic group is regarded positively in the U.S. (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). Among LGBTQ+ Black youth, 90% have trouble sleeping, 80% experience high stress and consistent depression, 90% have experienced racial discrimination, and only 5% say that Black people are regarded positively in the country (Human Rights Campaign, 2019). Two in five Latinx LGBTQ+ students experience both racist and anti-LGBTQ+ harassment in school (Zongrone, Truong, & Kosciw, 2020). Intersectional oppression is even more persistent and pronounced for Black, queer girls and TGE students (Griffith, 2019; Hudson & Braithwaite, 2017).

The populations of queer, cisgender female, or TGE Youth of Color are particularly vulnerable in all spaces due to their unique, intersectional identities. This applies to schools, where their identity-related experiences and perceptions not only impact their safety but also their academic success, engagement, and motivation. Single-identity approaches continue to prevail in activism and academic data analysis, including some of the research that will be explored in Chapter 2 as foundations for this study. Few studies to date in the field of Literacy Studies have focused on intersectional populations across race, gender, and sexuality. The erasure perpetrated by approaches that reduce students to one aspect of their identity at any given time means that almost nothing is known - or, I argue more devastatingly, **wondered** or **imagined** - about the literacy experiences of cisgender female, TGE, and/or queer middle school Students of Color.

In college (where I was, by my senior year, one of three known TGE students on campus and immersed in a community of queer women that was tiny compared to the seeming swarms of gay men) and through my twenties, I presented often at conferences or workshops about transgender rights and issues. In my mid-thirties, I now realize that this was not necessarily because of my facilitation or any other specific skill, but often because I was the only trans person known (and/or comfortable) to the cisgender people making the requests. Until just five years ago, I had never worked professionally with another TGE person, that I knew of, due to a constellation of privileges that make trans people like me the most likely to have access to certain - or any - institutions (Keenan, 2017).

At a hearing in Hartford, Connecticut in 2002, numerous horrified citizens testified that if the state legislature passed a law banning discrimination against trans people, “you could have transsexuals teaching your children!” I testified next as a visibly genderqueer, soon-to-be teacher that this was correct, but not a bad thing; a few years later, I titled a personal essay “Transsexuals, Teaching Your Children!”

After college, I entered queer and trans communities in New York City identified as a butch dyke; over the next two years, I transitioned from Ms. to Mr. at the public middle school in Brooklyn where I first taught. Before I transitioned, I had often criticized trans people who looked like I do now, misunderstanding physical transition and gender-affirming surgeries or hormone therapy to be a byproduct

of misogyny (as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists, or TERFs, have always done - see Chapter 2) and to be equivalent to the oppressive heteronormativity imposed upon me and other queer people by innumerable cisgender men. Then, I read Sandy Stone's seminal essay in which she describes the medical gatekeeping that continues to force trans people into binary gender performances as a prerequisite for access to essential health care; from then on, I made efforts to refrain from scrutiny of gender expression (Stone, 1992).

Prior to and during my first few years injecting testosterone into my quadriceps every other week, one quandary was that there seemed to be no option other than becoming "a man"; a transition from necessarily, or so I thought, entailed a transition to a specific, legible category (man). I had experimented with my gender identity in college using spirit gum and facial hair crafted from tufts snipped from my own head; in advocating for gender-neutral housing options, I had been placed in the dorm designated for the mentally ill only for being trans; the Dean of Student Affairs had agreed to meet with me, asserted I was "the only transgender on campus" (I wasn't), and asked me to teach her what trans students needed; I had found solace in the Women's Center and campus LGBTQ Studies initiative, where I was encouraged to create a week-long speaker series about TGE identities.

The simultaneity of my hypervisibility as trans on campus and the preferential treatment afforded me as I moved about public spaces as an assumed cis man for the first time overwhelmed me, causing me to run quickly back into the familiar, though dissonant, embrace of butchness. I frequently channeled rage towards any people, including trans or non-binary folks, who looked like I do know. (Now, my body is experiencing what is tantamount to menopause - or "MANopause" when in-group trans humor helps navigate dysphoria - and I realize how little I knew, how little the world allowed me to know, and how little I allowed myself to know about my own future.)

During my senior year, when I wrote an op-ed for my college paper about the Duke men's lacrosse players whom a Black woman had accused of rape, the newspaper editor insisted upon adding the term "allegedly" since no trial had yet occurred. Frustrated, I exhorted her to reconsider, certain that these White, cisgender men were guilty. I abhorred the widespread investment in giving privileged accused parties the benefit of the doubt, and the "what if they didn't do it"s and the "this will ruin their lives"s. I deliberately made the opposite my assumed lens - they obviously, undoubtedly did it. Just weeks prior, a men's lacrosse player at my college had drunkenly chased me down a dorm hallway, yelling homophobic slurs like "dyke" at me.

I was flummoxed when it emerged that the accusation against the Duke lacrosse players contained untruths. I could not accept it. There was no space for multiple narratives within my paradigm. I persisted. "Those lacrosse guys must have done something." And they had done something, later evidenced by emails among them

riddled with brutal misogyny - but not the crimes of assault and rape of which they had been accused (Gassam Asare, 2020). As so many feared, this incident became a weapon wielded across the country by individuals, pundits, and politicians to justify rape culture, impugn Black women, and invalidate sexual assault survivors.

What are the risks of making space for multiple narratives? What are the stakes of not doing so? To what extent does the specific circumstance matter in answering these questions?

To begin answering and augmenting a growing body of questions about this population of students, this study employed Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) model of comparative case study (which will be explored further in Chapter 3), to structure a narrative that traced participants' perceptions of Whiteness (the focal phenomenon) in literacy instruction.

Whiteness in various forms has been illustrated to have an impact on the learning and academic experiences of Students of Color, as will be elaborated in Chapter 2. Significantly, the student participants in this study were not the objects of the study - in a continued effort to trouble dominant research paradigms, participants were central as co-researchers, in an attempt at a form of co-creation of knowledge and language with participants that Manning (2018) would call "research-creation." Whiteness was the object of the study, and students-as-cases collaborated with me-as-researcher to examine it via tracing their perceptions of it. Phenomena all around us, and how we perceive these phenomena, inform and even exist as the foundation of our individual worlds. Whiteness as a phenomenon is assumed to be unbounded in that it is continuously produced, in any given moment, through participants' interactions with text(s) and context(s). As explored later, this understanding of Whiteness informed the decision to take a comparative case study approach that accommodates – and indeed expects – unboundedness.

Whiteness, like other identity categories named and explored later in this Introduction, is not a static object. As Glenn Singleton (2015) describes in his book Courageous Conversations about Race, markers of Whiteness can also be broken down into the categories of color (physical traits), culture (heritage, community, affiliations, behavior, and performance), and consciousness (mindset, attitudes, and beliefs). Whiteness, therefore, is more complex than an individual's racial identity, and it is connected to privileges, behaviors, cultures, and mindsets (Singleton, 2015). This means that, while the impact of White individuals (especially teachers) on participants was an important facet of this study, the study also accounted for the ways Whiteness can be read in classrooms (or schools, or communities) where there are no White-identified people. Whiteness, as all hegemonically dominant positionings, impacts everyone - including people in all roles throughout a school community - in different ways and applies pressure to everyone to adhere to dominant, aligned norms in behavior and language. Not only racism but homophobia and transphobia across the world can be traced to imposed gender binaries and sexual mores of White colonizing forces (Feinberg, 1997; Kalende, 2014; Paramo, 2018).

I reflect often on the ways various traumas - from growing up in the absence of representations of queer or TGE people, from my first coming-out as queer and butch while still stuck in a closet at age sixteen, and from my losses in the early years of transition - have deterred me from closely examining my Whiteness and other ways in which I had and have power. What influence did my contexts - growing up in one of the Whitest states in the country, in a White middle-class community that upheld a culture of politeness demanding silence about race and sexuality, and attending a predominantly- and historically-White Ivy League college - have on my conception of myself, until my mid-to-late twenties, primarily through a lens of disempowerment, loneliness, and scarcity?

From a young age, as I began to feel a sense of Otherness inside of me even

before I could articulate it, I translated my anxieties and fears into competition. Accumulating institutional accolades seemed the best way to proactively protect myself from accusations of being an imposter or a disgrace; and competition was rewarded and set up around me. (To this day, people I barely know will make unsolicited comparisons between me and another trans person they know. This started from Day One of my transition process.) I became locked into this competition instead of grappling with the vulnerabilities of transness and queerness, upholding a mindset that my self-protection and self-worth depended upon proving myself to be better than others. This need to win only confined me in my own unhealed pain and White rage, in the long term exacerbating rather than easing my anxieties and depression.

As I get older, I think about my legacy no longer as my reputation or ability to conquer or win out of a misguided sense of self-protection. I think about my impact on others around me and my ability to create and sustain genuine community for the first time, something that Whiteness can make hard or invisible.

This study assumed that phenomena are both reflective of and constituent of a broader, sociopolitical context. Aligned with the comparative case study approach (which will be further explored in Chapters 2 and 3), the primary context of the study was the space of the Humanities classroom (a hybrid of virtual and physical spaces), **and** that context was assumed to be influenced and impacted by the broader, multi-scalar local, institutional, national, and global contexts in which it was situated (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). In line with its critical, intersectional, and constructivist approach, this study defined literacy as a social practice, specifically as a socially situated and context-based practice of reading, writing, speaking, or listening that also functions to signal group membership, beliefs, and values (Duke & Mallette, 2011). As contexts and available technologies change, literacies expand and shift as well, and the meanings communicated through literacy are renegotiated in each new space and moment (Duke & Mallette, 2011, p. 72). As the study considered literacy instruction as central to its context and Whiteness

as its object (and phenomenon to be traced), and reading as a product of interaction among reader, text, and context(s), I approached students' perceptions of Whiteness in instruction (reading Whiteness in pedagogy) as similar to the process of reading a text (Beers & Probst, 2017). Like reading a text, reading Whiteness is always situated in numerous intersecting, always-moving contexts - even within one classroom space.

This understanding of Whiteness as an unbounded phenomenon necessitated an approach to exploring participants' perceptions of this phenomena that could account for slippage and movement. For this reason, the study employed narrative inquiry to explore this phenomenon. Narrative inquiry, in the context of the unbounded approach of comparative case study, enacts intersectionality's critical, justice-oriented lens and assumption that literacy, instruction, and classrooms are always already political and politicized. Intersectionality and narrative inquiry provide lenses to address oppression and seek justice without generalizing experience (including but not limited to pain and harm). Intersectional theory challenges normativity, centering those most harmed by systems of oppression both generally and specifically. Intersectionality allows us to envision a flow of power that is not unidirectional from person to person but more complex, and to pursue the abolition of harmful, oppressive institutions (Kiesling, 2017; Love, 2019; Haymarket Books, 2020). Abolitionism recognizes what adrienne maree brown (2020) describes as "the omnipresence of punitive justice" in our present society, as well as "the ways that our current justice system roots in slavery" (p. 5). This movement is buttressed by abolitionist models of transformative justice in which, according to activist K Agbebiyi, "no one is disposable or alienated from their community" - which, by extension, means that no parts of anyone or their identities must

be disposable or separable (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2020). It also entails, within communities seeking justice and abolition, “feeling not just for what is punitive, but for where there is gleeful othering, revenge, or punishment of others, particularly when these things deepen our belonging to each other, usually briefly” (brown, 2020, p. 12). To avoid the “instant judgment” and “punishment” that brown (2020) recognizes as “practices of power over others” that undermine abolitionist movements, she identifies inquiry, reflection, and leaning into messy conversation as powerful strategies (p. 43).

Question- and possibility-generation stem from nuanced listening that engages a deliberate and persistent curiosity about the specific situatedness (and contexts) of the story and storyteller. We must listen to stories with a lens towards questions, strengths, insights, and talents and avoid reducing stories to victims, statistics, or social media memes. This entails hearing students narrate their lives, accepting what their identities mean to them, and learning from their perceptions of themselves, their learning environments, and their literacy experiences. This is because justice must be fought for and, in the wake of harms or oppression, restored.

Storytelling is central to restorative justice, necessitating a narrative inquiry approach, which draws from the humanities and, unlike other approaches to case study, explores the lives of individuals in order to tell stories of individual experiences (Creswell, 2017). Through narrative inquiry, we can probe patterns of meaning to seek powerful, generative questions rather than glorify assertion-making. This is particularly important when seeking to restore justice in circumstances of material harm without relying on the United States’ criminal justice system, which pursues punishment for crime often at the expense of healing and sometimes while replicating or exacerbating the

trauma at the root of the harms (Klein, 2020). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains in her origin story as an abolitionist, our current punishment-based approaches are simply not fixing the problems and harms that need to be addressed (Kumanyika, 2020). As abolitionists maintain (and as will be discussed more later), the current systems of punishment- and vengeance-based approaches to harm disincentivize truth-telling and apology - both of which are often critical elements of healing processes (Klein, 2020; Kumanyika, 2020). According to sujatha baliga, director of the Restorative Justice Project at Impact Justice, restorative justice demands a significant shift in not only how we approach individuals but what questions we pose (Klein, 2020).

Embracing slippage across socially-defined and -imposed categories of identity, especially in light of the material impact of those categorical definitions, is a political act and underpins intersectional theory, narrative inquiry, and comparative case study. An understanding of categorical identity as simultaneously meaningful and without rigid limits drove Kimberly Drew's and Jenna Wortham's (2020) curation of their project Black Futures: "Blackness is infinite – a single book cannot attempt to contain the multitudes and multiverse... We are in a continuum of those who came before and those who will come after... Like us, this book is not linear. Like us, this book lives and breathes beyond temporal Western frameworks. There is no past, present, or future, nor is there a beginning, middle, or end" (p. XIII). Valuing unboundedness creates room for complexity and fullness, and it demands the continuous generation of new questions – all of which drive the vision-building and imagining at the core of abolitionism.

Rather than approaching Whiteness, then, as having an essence that can be objectively pinpointed - leading to traditional questions like "where does Whiteness exist

in literacy instruction?” - a narrative approach can account for more slippage in the interactive process of meaning construction and produce new, generative questions like “how do intersectional lenses influence perceptions of Whiteness?”, “how do participants’ see Whiteness moving into, through, and out of literacy instruction?”, and “what do participants describe as the relationship between Whiteness and their visions of liberatory literacy?”

These autoethnographic vignettes in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 enact a continuous self-examination of my own intersectional identities and relationship to Whiteness prior to the study. (The autoethnography continued during the study, and after the study I mined the autoethnography for generative questions, as will be explored in Chapter Five.). As will be captured in my review of related research, arts-based methods of expression such as poetry and narrative can help uncover concepts, generate questions, and explore truths that more linear or direct explorations cannot (Manning, 2018; Rankine, 2020). Through this autoethnography, arts-based methods are the vehicle to explore my personal investment in and experiences with Whiteness as it impacts my understandings of punishment, abolition, community, queerness, transness, and more.

*At the very start of my physical transition, in my early twenties, a White, trans woman accused me on social media of physical abuse. I found myself caught off-guard: This was untrue. As it took me almost a decade afterwards to be able to even acknowledge and fully understand, I had been the partner regularly subjected to physical attacks and compelled to keep silent about many aspects of the relationship. **And** I had been emotionally volatile, full of anger and distrust, always ready for an argument or shouting match, and quick with scathing accusations. Shame from these real issues that I had brought to the table – the problems that I brought in and out with(in) me - magnified the overwhelm of the untruths of the accusation. The feeling of impossibility, of being trapped in this singular narrative that was now being assumed about me, only made me turn deeper inwards. How, without reduction or generalization or violation of privacies, could I respond to the untruths? And: Where?*

*My first days as a new adult had coincided with the emergence of social media. Since then I have admiringly watched movements like Black Lives Matter leverage the virtual sphere to organize and resist; **and** writer Zadie Smith (2018) famously avoids social media, critiquing its facade of neutrality that masks the careful, politicized curation of a very specific and dangerously limited form of human interaction. The architecture of social media platforms bolsters coalition-building **and** deters, distills, or distorts dialogue.*

In perhaps my first, glaring lesson about letting go of the need to compete or to “win,” I responded to the virtual accusations with Internet silence. I did not reply to the direct Facebook messages and emails from strangers telling me they were going to punch me, beat me up, drag me to jail, or worse. I sat with the momentary feelings of being outsmarted or outplayed, and with the feelings of powerlessness. Few members of the particular sub-community of which I had been a part contacted me or engaged me directly. The folks online did not want to hear my story; they did not want to have to consider nuance; they wanted immediate clarity on who is “good” and who is “bad.” Some of the few who did reach out to me brought with them no space for multiple narratives - or at least I thought so at the time, having already curled up into a defensive ball, a porcupine with spikes out.

Four years after the initial accusation, it was circulated around the Internet again. At a party that month, a White, non-binary person started punching me in the shoulder repeatedly and telling me “I think you’re evil” in front of our uncomfortable mutual friends, one of whom told them to stop. I said “It’s okay” – though it wasn’t. After the party, I agreed to walk to the train with this person and take it in the same direction. On the train, they asked me to sleep with them. I declined the proposition but accompanied them as they walked their dog. At no point did I share my story. I am not certain why I remained silent or stayed in conversation with them. Perhaps, I had not yet weeded out pressures I had internalized: It was the responsibility of masculine people to withstand any onslaught without cracking, emoting, or commenting.

When virtual stories about me have been renewed with no attempt at conversation, years later, I experience frustration: What is it, exactly, that they want from me? It feels like this particular sub-community, or perhaps just specific vocal members followed by others who find these vocal leaders brave or who are afraid of becoming a new target of the same wrath - or both - simply want to ensure that I remain simultaneously distanced from them and perpetually available for vengeful disgust. Each time, my personal hurt is eclipsed by my disappointment that a sub-community that speaks so often (and indeed once taught me) about restorative justice, conflict resolution, decriminalization, and abolition failed to make any attempt to create a forum for conflict resolution or restoration when two of its own were in the mix. Instead, they leapt to an immediate conclusion. (Considering the many, wonderful people I am in community with now, I have to ask myself: Who is this “they” that I am thinking of here, exactly? The answer is complicated.)

Twelve years later, I continue to discover how that unquestioned, singular narrative about me - so rarely communicated to me by those who espouse it - becomes further warped as it is revived at intervals through time, by strangers increasingly removed from me now and from me twelve years ago. I have maintained my public silence in the virtual sphere, even when the accuser died

several years ago, long after we had last seen each other. Any opportunity to reconcile narratives, to repair, or to heal, seems to have been truly lost.

Over the last twelve years, I have asked myself so many times: What does an invitation to conversation demand, individually and collectively? What does it cost?

Now, I recognize how my ability to avoid engaging with the virtual narratives about me, to choose only to engage in the messiness of true conversations with those willing to have them with me, has hinged upon privileges. I have been able to step away by virtue of a social mobility imparted to a large degree through Whiteness, economic stability, and educational status. I did not rely on that particular sub-community as heavily as others within it do, especially those who are more marginalized - which is not to say it was not painful, but rather that in the midst of a painful experience I retained options, agency, and my life.

Does this mean that it was my responsibility to resist removal, to stick around, to insist that the (my?) communities better handle this situation and others like it? To try to explain that what was happening in the virtual sphere was making everything worse, not only (or even mostly, I can see now) for me? Instead of responding with "I don't need or trust you, either," should I have tried to be proactive and to bring authentic conversations to the table, despite that being the opposite of how I was generally approached? At what risk to myself, and to others in more vulnerable positions? Would that have been possible? Is it too late?

No story or person is disposable; every individual's story is not only important but, in this aspiration, essential in the context(s) of their communities. Narrative inquiry can enact the transformative justice imperative of intersectionality; this extends to pedagogical and instructional contexts, in which oral storytelling, verbal discourse, and highlighting the power of the personal voice have been recognized as culturally responsive practices particularly for Students of Color (Hammond, 2015).

The justice-oriented power of storytelling resides in part in its emphasis on specificity and locality. Each story matters and derives from an individual's intersectional positioning and the unique way in which they "exceed" (see Monique Wittig quote later) those categorical boundaries.

Rather than intersectional stories being seen in isolation or as disruptions, they should be read in sociopolitical context (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Lange, Duran, & Jackson, 2019). Recent researchers have explored the necessity for intersectionality theory in pursuits of transformative justice, as I explain more in Chapter 2. Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) described “freedom dreaming” as a means, specifically grounded in the history of the African diaspora, to envision a world that does not yet exist, one free from systems of intersectional oppression; intersectionality theory can - and must - inform how we envision collective struggle and resistance. In doing this study, I hoped to surface previously unexplored ideas, perspectives, and questions.

I wonder: How did the absence of any process of resolution or restoration not only fail me, but also fail the entire community? Who represents, and who comes to speak for a community in the age of social media? What did various members of the sub-community message with their responses to this situation? Regardless of others’ opinions regarding what did or didn’t happen, what were the community-wide implications of my disposability with neither conversation nor any actual accountability, just a vague, deeply-personal-and-utterly-impersonal Internet wrath?

When Facebook was first created and before the college students using it applied privacy settings, I discovered numerous fellow undergraduates who had explicitly homophobic or misogynistic statements in their personal profiles. Along with someone close to me, I printed off these profiles and plastered them around campus, befuddled when the public response focused on the shaming and not the content of the offending profiles. I dismissed those criticisms as coming from people who would never find any challenge of dominance to be acceptable. Several friends told us they did not agree with our methodology in this instance, that we could have messaged the individuals directly or addressed the harm in a different way; but I saw myself as brave and felt angered that their anger did not match the form of mine. The people we had shamed were messed up, in my good/bad schema; in order to subject them to punishment, I had to see them as different from and worse than me. Does my virtual punishment years later, for something entirely unrelated, karmically match an earlier offense? Are my estranged or anonymous, online punishers different from and better than me?

One of my fears in engaging in this project is enduring (through word of mouth) another cycle of digital declarations about me with no opportunity for dialogue. A

reframe provides a critical shift: Given the psychological and physical impact these fears have had on me, what could it possibly feel like (and what toll must it take) to fear for one's own or one's friends' and families' literal lives on a daily basis?

If I feel persistent anxiety to this day - which I do, despite my agency and options - from this experience with a sub-community that had once seemed to offer the only validating space for someone like me and that once claimed to value me, then what forms of anxiety or distrust must queer and TGE Youth of Color experience when navigating the dynamics (or conflicts) between themselves and their various communities - including in schools and classrooms?

I believe the participants in this study, in conjunction with close reading of the words and works of historical and ancestral abolitionists, can and must guide the present-day freedom dreaming that takes place in this paper - starting in the context of schools and education. The participants were three students at the middle school in Harlem where I have been Assistant Principal for three years and a visiting Literacy Coach for three years prior to that. All three students identified as queer, TGE, or cisgender female and as Black and/or Latinx. This comparative case study and autoethnography grounded in intersectional theory aimed to engage this justice and abolitionist imperative of vision-making and possibility-expansion (rather than seeking absolute truth in what already exists), recognizing that our current, material possibilities (often represented in the United States by explicit or implicit, hegemonic systems) cannot suffice to eradicate oppressive institutions - let alone initiate or sustain collective healing.

Though my research questions shifted over the course of the study (as I will explore further in Chapter 3), I began by structuring the curriculum around the following primary research questions:

- When and how do queer, TGE, or cisgender female, Black and/or Latinx students perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction in their Humanities classrooms? How do these perceptions make them feel?
- How do their intersectional identities influence how, where, and when they perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction?
- What do the visions of this population for liberatory literacy instruction look like?

My secondary research questions for the study, more grounded in a primary context for participants, were:

- How can educators create a space conducive to students' development of their own intersectional identities, examination of Whiteness in literacy instruction, and freedom dreaming about liberatory literacy instruction?
- What deliberate steps can educators make to create this space in their development of curriculum?

It is important to recognize that over time I was able to engage in numerous authentic conversations with community. Gradually, over the following decade, through a series of such conversations, I gained (or potentially rediscovered) the capacity to reflect on and learn about myself, and to begin unlearning a rigid mental schema. Through these encounters, as Rankine (2020) considers them, I was forced to reframe, to examine what fellow educators might call “my part of the mess,” and to trace this part back through layers of time, space, and harm that I have perpetrated.

My first queer relationship was a heavy secret weighing upon myself and my girlfriend, who handed me Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues during our high school European History class and said “read that; it's you” - and as I read it that evening, it was the closest thing to Me that I had ever encountered. (Twenty years later, this is no longer the case.) Maybe starting then, or perhaps beginning when eight-year-old Me hid my ponytail behind my head in front of the bathroom mirror to wonder why I wasn't a boy, I learned to employ words as weapons – whether to compete, create an armor around myself, or challenge normativity.

As a young woman, that quality was read as aggressive by many who responded with discomfort, homophobia, and sexism – which sometimes blurred the differences between critique and oppression. Within my White, able, American body, I cultivated the ability to interpret just about any critique as problematic instead of the ability to consider multiple truths co-existing at once. The new (to me) group of people who validated me and were drawn to me, who spoke of my courage and not my judgmental lack of compassion, were those whose opinions mattered.

I continue to learn about – and attempt to name and unlearn - my own impulse to punish others and to wield what adrienne maree brown (2020) refers to as power over. In my teen and then early adult years, I leveraged my uninhibited verbosity full of self-righteous rage to rail against injustices wherever I saw or felt them, and in the face of any individual people – rarely pausing to consider that I may have been mistaken or misguided, that I may have been missing important context or perspectives, or that my personal emotions might be just as likely to fuel a tantrum as to be a barometer of justice. As I transitioned, after having lived the first 20 to 23 years of my life as an (assumed) middle class, masculine, White woman, I failed to reflect or self-correct, often unable to distinguish important critical feedback or standard rejections from misogynistic, homophobic, or transphobic attacks. I did not truly begin to consistently practice feeling, naming, and owning my emotions (rather than politicizing them or tamping them down entirely) until, at age thirty, I began working at a middle school (my current school and an important context for this study) grounded in restorative justice, where the community recognizes that punishment is an ineffective teacher and an even worse healer.

I had believed until I was thirty years old that my death at a young age was inevitable; I had no models of or vision for trans adulthood. I did not see a future for myself and therefore could not see much of anything - certainly not my own Whiteness. I positioned myself in close proximity to homophobia, transphobia, and suffocating closets and unresolved traumas, and then I would scream at and berate and blame those with whom I continued to surround myself. I wielded words and emotions viciously against anyone whom I perceived as a threat, especially those closest to me whom I had “let in,” no matter what degree of damage they could or might do to me. I caused significant harm, though not the kinds of harm that some thought or think, and harms both similar to and different from the ones I endured.

Whiteness, mostly, prevented me from wondering: What of the destruction around me came from within me? Did a partner who refused to touch my body mirror my own self-disgust? Did a partner who was ashamed to tell their family about my transness parallel embarrassment that I harbored about being trans? Did a partner who was physically violent towards me when intoxicated reveal my toxic misconception that I had to “take it” (violence and full responsibility) to prove

my worthiness? Was my animosity towards cisgender men jealousy, or self-loathing? Now, I share with a friend that I almost can't believe so many people regularly expressed interest in dating me prior to six or seven years ago; I joke about that while understanding that part of the problem was that, at that time, I didn't believe anyone actually did want specifically me.

How much earlier could - and should – my reflective processes have happened? What role did Whiteness play in the delay? In addition to those with whom I have engaged in reparative processes, how many other people could have benefitted or could benefit from engaging in this process with me? After so many formative years convinced I was isolated, abnormal, and utterly alone, this question feels strange to consider - but, as years pass and fade: Just how different from others could I possibly be?

The framework for this study must attend to the ways in which the identity categories referred to so far - e.g. Black, White, woman, queer - are simultaneously real and fluid due to their social constructedness. Here, I will break down and define real and fluid.

By real, I mean that in the land often referred to as the United States, one's intersectional identities directly impact one's material opportunities, experiences, body, and psyche (as explained above): “research in the field must account for the complexity of lived experience and examine how lived experience is understood in relation to materiality” (Sweet, 2019, p. 52). Colorism, for example, is a consistent, global phenomenon resulting in heightened discrimination and barriers for those with darker skin (Knight, 2015).

By fluid, I mean both that an individual's identity may itself change—from personal inclination or self-learning (e.g. shifting from “Hispanic” to “Chicanx” identity, or from an assumed straight identity to recognized queerness), changes in context or legal categories (e.g. immigration from one nation-state to another leading to different status,

access to marriage, how femininity tends to be read in New York City ball culture versus in Kansas City), or shifts in who one is perceived to be (e.g. a light-skinned African American identified individual assumed to be Latinx or Afro-Latinx when living in Washington Heights but not when visiting their two Black parents in Tennessee, a trans person assumed to be cisgender and binary at work but clocked in trans spaces), among others—and also that these categories themselves signify a vast expanse of varied experiences. This approach to comparative case study was unwilling to treat identities as static. Even if available and socially legible signifiers remain the same, one’s concept and enactment of identity can change significantly with contexts. Identity, or an individual’s answer to the question “Who am I?”, is “forged in social interactions, which are embedded in a complex, differentiated, and stratified society” (Debebe & Reinart, 2014, p. 277).

I had lived such a visibly queer and gender expansive existence up to the point I started hormone therapy that I was convinced that I would be read by the world-at-large as a gay man post-transition. Instead, the communities in which I had often found myself sought out (the way masculinity is still hegemonically prized everywhere) greeted me with snide comments like “it’s straight Scott!” This did not sit right for reasons I had not parsed out – I did not identify as straight in part because I did not truly identify as a man. But binary expectations weighed upon us all, in how we saw each other and ourselves. A loss of cache and legibility within my familiar spaces clashed with the material privileges I gained in most other spaces by being assumed to be straight and cisgender (until and unless it involved medical care, reference to my life prior to age 25, or understandings of family, for examples). Having a daily experience seemingly at odds with my personal identity caused an inner conflict that I had not previously experienced, when my visible queerness and butchness had (while subjecting me to homophobia in the world-at-large) made my lived identity within my sub-communities feel coherent.

A justice-oriented approach to identity requires recognizing not only individuals’ self-identification, but also their lived experiences in the world, which may vary

tremendously based on factors beyond self-identification: How one is perceived in one's immediate context, how one performs identity in each context in an attempt to be read the way one hopes, the communities in which one was immersed while young, family history, experience, and heritage, and more.

This study approached intersectionality as an absolute necessity in order to account for the differences among individuals who belong to - or rather, who perform or "do" - these socially-constructed, moving identity categories that correlate directly to power, position, and opportunity within the nation-state known as the United States.

I will not equivocate: Identity matters because of the power disproportionately imbued to individuals on the basis of categorization of identities. This study was grounded purposefully in material, lived experiences while recognizing Kumashiro's (2001) caveat, foundational to his belief in the importance of intersectionality, that "our efforts to challenge one form of oppression often unintentionally contribute to other forms of oppression, and our efforts to embrace one form of difference often exclude and silence others" (p.1). The hyper-locality demanded by an unbounded intersectionality produces the opportunity for a crucial both/and, in that identity categories are sources of unity or sameness and also sites of expansive, potentially irreconcilable, difference.

Identity categories provide battlegrounds for civil rights but often attempt to cobble together vastly different experiences and also can be swiftly redefined by the same hegemonic society that originally birthed them, as etymology lays bare: Legal requirements to meet the description of "White" in the United States have changed numerous times over the past century (Kelkar, 2017); the term Hispanic, widely believed to have been created by the 1970's Nixon Administration as a way to categorize Spanish-

speaking, Brown people in the country, was adopted by Latinx activists to attempt to secure political power despite the tremendous variation among “Hispanic” experiences (Meraji, 2017; The Atlantic, 2021); the term “queer” was once universally understood as a slur and now provides arguably the most inclusive and politicized term for those with non-dominant sexual orientations, if not one sanctioned by the State - though “homosexual” was removed from the APA’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1973 (Burton, 2015); and the term “transgender” did not emerge as an alternative to the pathologizing “transsexual” until 1971, though many trans people existed long before then, and though the APA still defines Gender Identity Disorder as a mental illness per the DSM (Whittle, 2010). As queer, French, feminist Monique Wittig (1992) playfully suggested when she wrote in her essay anthology The Straight Mind “Imagine an excess of ‘I,’ an ‘I’ exalted”: While how one’s identity is read in context surely matters, one’s “I” inevitably overflows and breaks out of these boundaries - whether imposed by the State, a community, individuals, or oneself (p. 87). Manning (2018) builds upon the work of Edouard Glissant to note that “one body, should never suffice” and that “relations are what compose us, relations always in excess of the given, relations as the radically empirical more-than that continuously refashions what it means” (p. 7) Manning’s (2018) “more-than” resonates with Wittig’s (1992) “‘I’ exalted,” because both recognize that “I” is always in a process of being re-constituted through social interactions. Both the “‘I’ exalted” and the “more-than” continuously move and are “collective more than individual” (Manning, 2018, p. 4). Approaching understanding of the “‘I’ exalted” or this “more-than” necessitates a transversal lens.

Manning's (2018) understanding of the "more-than" self both demands unboundedness and generates the possibility of transformative justice and abolitionism.

Because trying to accost the system from another angle, trying to break the system from within its own modes of intelligibility, will in the end reduce us to victims and perpetrators, to humans firmly enveloped in a dream of self-sufficiency. We must instead begin with the differential of the more-than human that composes us. (p. 4).

Wittig's (1992) "'I' exalted" and Manning's (2018) "more-than" are "always yet to be composed" and continuously in flux and "do not presume the symmetry rebellion presupposes" (p. 5). As forms of resistance such as rebellion remain embedded in binaries that can not only reify but prop up existing power structures, abolitionism requires thinking beyond these binaries and reinventing what could be or become. The "more-than" and "'I' exalted" are indispensable lenses in this pursuit.

For all of the reasons above, aside from those terms defined in this chapter, the study made a shift from traditional research norms and accepted and embraced participants' interpretations and perceptions of Whiteness and other identity categories without me imposing a singular or predetermined definition upon them.

In my first job where nobody knew or assumed that I was transgender, at an education non-profit, I found myself in a group of men at happy hour during our Welcome conference. The discussion topic was which parts of women's bodies were most attractive. I commented on the premise itself, was met with awkward stares, and removed myself from the conversation. I did not want to be a man, and I never had wanted to be; manhood had simply been what someone like me, designated female at birth, transitioned to, by default, and after a lifetime of

discomfort in my own skin I had resigned myself to what seemed like the only viable possibility at the time.

At the age of 26, I purchased my first tattoo, a volume dial etched into my left wrist, deliberately visible regardless of my wardrobe in an attempt to flag my queerness for knowing audiences. My second tattoo, inked on my right forearm, spells out the quote above from Monique Wittig. Until I turned 34, my mind did not contain the possibility that I did not have to be a man - that I did not have to explain away a manhood that I had never possessed (though I had let it possess me, especially in my most harmful moments, even before transitioning). Through the proliferation of non-binary identities and verbiage at my disposal, I now avoid gendered titles, identify as trans and non-binary, and use any pronouns. A transition from no longer must entail a transition to anywhere in particular. I have never identified with manhood and do not have to! As many trans and non-binary advocates say: Facial hair has no gender, though it impacts our lived experiences in different ways.

This social approach was also necessarily informed by engagement models of literacy, which both confirm the effects of motivation on context-based literacy learning and identify student engagement as a determining factor in the effectiveness of literacy instruction (Ruddell & Unrau, 2011, p. 1022). Relatedly, literacy experts including Kylene Beers have long established that not only is reading a highly active process of meaning-making, but that understanding this can support dependent readers - who often mistakenly assume reading comprehension is a magical, passive process of “getting it” - in becoming independent (Beers, 2002; Beers & Probst, 2017).

The understanding of experiences as productions of meaning by interactions between an individual and (con)text(s), and as having no essence outside of the perception (or “reading”) of that experience by any unique individual, also guided the narrative inquiry behind the study. In fact, the action of reading simultaneously engages multiple scales of context and thereby produces one’s interpretation of an experience - which parallels the act of reading a text - **and** does not imply that the experience (or text)

is or was not real or impactful, just that meaning-making is always situated in numerous intersecting, fluid contexts in which a predetermined, objective, or singular significance cannot simply be extracted.

This approach to literacy and reading paralleled the process of unpacking identity categories, including Whiteness, as simultaneously produced and real. Additionally, this recognition of perceiving-as-reading accounts for the multifacetedness of race - color, culture, consciousness - in that Whiteness can be read in the content of a text or in the ways in which a text is taught or read (Singleton, 2015). Adding a layer of attention to power dynamics warranted by the phenomenon of Whiteness, approaching forms of perceiving as *critical reading* resonates with the origins of one variation of the term “reading” - to point out someone’s flaws, requiring tremendously attuned close reading - in Black communities and drag or ball culture (Pandell, 2018).

The Closet implies a clearly delineated inside and outside, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) illuminated. The Closet is a specter, it is one means by which language reinforces socially constructed binaries and boundaries; and the arbitrariness of a boundary makes it no less real, no less valent or violent. In my third job where nobody assumed I was trans unless informed of this (the process of “coming out” being continuous and moving, challenging the inside/outside of the Closet-specter), I decided to disclose to my new team through a recommendation of a Science Fiction book for young adults. This book featured a teenager receiving a full body transplant, waking up with his same brain in an entirely new body. Its resonance with my personal experience surprised me. Trans people have always existed but have long had to find mirrors of ourselves in Science Fiction and Fantasy, and in texts where we are not explicitly written; I now recognize that I had been reading myself into texts long before Stone Butch Blues and before I was even conscious of any of the identities that have and hold me now (though not in any fixed manner). In middle school, I consumed hundreds of novels about angsty, teenage, cisgender male athletes and found validation in what felt resonant, across and through numerous identity categories.

In this study, only by deploying a lens informed by narrative inquiry and intersectionality did I open the possibility of disrupting dominant research power dynamics. Our intersectional identities inform how we are seen as individuals and what we experience, and intersectionality has most often been employed to deconstruct interlocking systems of oppression and identify differentiated harm. As Lorde emphasizes, our identities cannot be extricated from each other. I (the researcher) am White, queer, and transgender, and I bring all of these (and much more) with me to the table without the option of speaking to or embodying only one at any given time; I could not expect to engage my potential points of convergence (e.g. queerness) with participants without my points of divergence (Whiteness, role as Assistant Principal and researcher, etc) fully present and accounted for as well.

Bias in research is inevitable, and for that reason reflexivity is an added benefit to qualitative research (Lichtman, 2012). As Kim Etherington describes, reflexivity demands that the researcher “come out from under the cloak... and look at yourself” (Douglas, 2016, 2:10). One element of that reflexivity includes narrating my own positioning and naming dominant power dynamics throughout the study in order to mediate (rather than exacerbate or leverage) them. However, in this study reflexivity would not suffice to interrogate my positioning. A critical case study approach necessitates a thorough, multi-scalar (“transversal”) analysis of the sociopolitical and spatial context(s) of the study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), which meant that not only I-as-researcher but I-as-Assistant Principal warranted examination due to my influence on the literacy, pedagogy, and culture of the school and classrooms within it as well as what I represent or embody of the broader Department of Education system. The most effective

tool to conduct this examination, while maintaining alignment with the study's framework and analytic lenses, was autoethnography (which I will describe in more detail in Chapter 3). This autoethnography is enacted in personal narrative form throughout this paper, some of which became artifacts that I shared with participants during the process of the study. It is important to note that the autoethnographic elements in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 were written before I conducted the study, those in Chapter 4 were written during the course of the study, and those in Chapter 5 were written after the study was complete. With my research structured around a curriculum-as-method (elaborated in Chapter 3) that with modifications could transfer to different schools and classroom contexts, the autoethnography is an essential part of the curriculum for the teacher-facilitator who implements it.

Further troubling categorical distinctions and traditional participant-researcher dynamics, participants contributed to the autoethnographic portion of the curriculum, utilizing various media to narrate their experiences of me-as-researcher and me-as-Assistant Principal as well as their experiences of Whiteness.

In 2011, I wrote: "Growing up in Vermont, I attended public schools and eventually graduated from a small Catholic high school where I was taught that I could do anything I put my mind to. And, basically, I could."

Now, I am fascinated by this synopsis, as my lens has changed. Growing up, I was taught that I could do anything I put my mind to - until I came out as queer, and then later as trans. During these coming out experiences and transitions, the idea that I could do anything was, in my very White, homogeneous community, absolutely not the message I received. In fact, I had the overwhelming sense that my life would end by the time I was 35, that I had no future, that I was a shameful embarrassment.

By 2011, though, a great deal of reconciliation had happened (for which I was grateful), and my self-confidence in my personal transitions had grown. I wrote the initial autobiography to share with fellow adjunct professors at the second job

I held at which nobody around me saw my transness or queerness without my naming them, and at which there were few other LGBTQ+ employees that I knew of. My original statement was not incorrect, in the sense that Whiteness has given and continues to give me access to opportunities - the extent of which I am likely still not aware. However, the way I framed the statement in 2011 came from a closeted place of not wanting or being ready, at the time, for my colleagues to be disabused of their normative assumptions about who I was. This is an important revision to the story.

My trans identity intersects with my Whiteness in my singular body, heart, mind, and soul. I am both, always. Shame and guilt are not productive in my aim to act in anti-racist ways; in fact, they are dangerous spaces, where my White privileges can emerge and do tremendous damage. When feeling shame, even if not about race, I lose perspective and a sense of myself - which entails losing a sense of my positioning as White, however rhetorically I may be able to name it. These negative emotions, when not named or regulated, open a door for me to take advantage of my Whiteness (at the expense of others) to temporarily feel more confident, worthy, or valuable. Honesty with myself and about who I am (all aspects) hinges on my ability to feel and be authentic. While the gist of the 2011 statement is true, my frame is different now and centers owning all parts of who I am - White, queer, trans, and more. This includes at my school and with students.

Definition of Terms

This project values self-identification from all participants, including from me-as-researcher and me-as-educator. I examine existing research about specific identities further in Chapter Two, where I also explore the theoretical framework of intersectionality and its approaches to identity. The terms that are specifically selected to describe identity categories – queer, trans and gender expansive (TGE), and Black and/or Latinx – were chosen because they offer the broadest umbrellas under which the sexual orientations, gender identities, and racial identities of participants in the study might belong. The study initially began using the term “transgender and gender non-conforming” (TGNC), but shifted to transgender and gender expansive (TGE) both because of the more asset-based terminology of “gender expansive” and because, while “gender non-conforming” is still widely utilized and accepted by many as a personal

identity, “gender expansive” has emerged as the most commonly used term particularly with youth (PFLAG, 2020).

In terms of individuals’ identity categories and markers, I refuse to offer decontextualized definitions of terms like “transgender” in part because no such singular definition exists outside of specific contexts (Keenan, 2017). To self-authorize to impose or enforce one in the space of this paper would contradict the very framework of this project and align me with the positivists and pathologizing institutions I challenge.

I do not attempt to offer a generalized or universal clarity, not out of spite for the reader but because I cannot possibly provide it - and certainly not on my own. On principle, the reader must take action and make meaning in contexts; this project demands that the reader be in conversation with the various, interwoven narratives presented here. Through the valuation of process over product, and specifically through the process of engaging with the messiness of the authentic conversations offered here, the reader becomes comfortable enough with not-knowing to wonder, imagine, question, and thereby (I hope) gain, grow, or expand in some way.

Throughout this paper, I have made the decision to capitalize racial identities and categories - Black, Brown, People of Color, and White, for examples. Particularly the decision to capitalize White remains a controversial one. In this paper, the purpose of capitalization is not to convey elevation but to distinguish racial identities from basic colors, which is particularly important in a study that approaches race and racial identity as irreducible to skin color alone (Singleton, 2015; Appiah, 2020). As will be further delineated in Chapter Two, this study relies to some extent on the naming of Whiteness as an always-viable racial identity and racial perspective in order to identify and resist its

hegemonic dominance; to defer to arguments for an uncapitalized “white” that capitulate to the myth of absence of collective identity or race - e.g. “white people don’t think of themselves as white” - would undermine this project (Appiah, 2020).

As the term People of Color - or Students of Color - is also a complicated one, and often serves to lump together a vast array of non-White experiences, I attempt to use it sparingly. I strive to be as specific as possible when referring to race, racial identities, and racialized experience - which I identify as one of the steps all of us who are White must push ourselves to take on. As a White person, I will not utilize acronyms pertaining to racial identities, though I am aware differently positioned researchers might feel more comfortable using terms like BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).

Significance of the Study

This study, guided by intersectionality and narrative inquiry (both of which are described in more detail in the next chapter), prioritized the “lived and subjective experiences” of participants (Fluornoy, 2018). In considering research on students, intersectionality has often (and impactfully) been employed as a tool to identify the oppressive ways in which individuals or category-bound groups are perceived and treated by dominant or mainstream society. This activist engagement with intersectionality, which is unequivocally necessary to affect material change within the legal and social systems of this particular nation-state, both employs an arguably responsive interpretation of intersectionality (highlighting differential harm, and how one is seen and harmed - or kept safe - by dominant society on the basis of intersecting identities) and demands a multiple-axis approach that, while intersectional on one level, necessitates a freeze on

identity categories. This study shifts to a more active understanding of intersectionality (how intersecting identities influence one's way of seeing, reading, and of meaning-making), within which identities can be understood as produced and ever-moving - while still naming the urgency, within this project as connected to broader abolitionist movements, of recognizing differential harm and oppression in order to amplify the most marginalized voices to lead our collective freedom dreaming.

This framing has the power to illuminate the tremendous skills, talents, and beauty of intersectionally marginalized students and to raise the questions: How does a student's positioning at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality support a unique and powerfully transformative way of seeing (reading) Whiteness in literacy instruction? How do the ways of seeing (reading) of queer, TGE, and cisgender female Black and Latinx students offer insight into the legacy - rooted in Black and Indigenous history - of revolutionary and radical ways of seeing, of freedom dreaming, and of envisioning futures that do not yet exist?

Rather than attempt to produce generalizable knowledge or singular truths about individuals fitting a delimited identity category (or constellation of categories), this intersectional approach demands attending to the slippage within the categories through story and inquiry. As a comparative case study, rather than focusing on the behaviors of a specific group of people, the study will explore how a specific group of people reads and makes meaning of Whiteness within the space of a classroom, taking into account the broader context impacting these relationships. This exploration aims not to produce consumable information but to open our collective capacity to create possibilities (following the lead of abolitionist thinkers who first proposed freedom dreaming): What

could liberatory literacy for queer, TGE, and cisgender female Students of Color – free from the trappings of hegemonic White dominance - look, feel, and sound like to all stakeholders? What could this liberatory literacy do?

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality

Lorde declared the statement in the epigraph on Page 1 of this paper during an address at Harvard University seven years before Kimberlé Crenshaw officially coined the term “intersectionality” (Lorde, 1982; Crenshaw, 1989). Both self-identified Black feminists, Lorde and Crenshaw responded critically to the tendency of social movements to take a single-issue focus that excluded the lived experiences of many of the alleged constituents within the movements. Most specifically, they took aim at the Second Wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s that had been dominated by White, cisgender women and that both explicitly and implicitly excluded Women of Color and transgender women (Stone, 1992; DiAngelo, 2018; Coleman, 2019; Schroth & Davis, 2021).

“Do you have a boyfriend?” my father’s mother asked Teenage Me when we visited her in 2001. The last time I saw Granny before starting to transition several years later, I did not respond out loud to that inevitable question. Gazing through the window at the barren acres, the Amish buggy passing by, and the by-then-defunct farm where Dad had milked cows and fed horses before school as a young boy, I thought “Granny, I am a boyfriend” - not yet realizing that having and being weren’t mutually exclusive, and already having internalized the limited narratives available for trans bodies and stories. Driving down miles of unpaved and unmarked road on our way back to where I called home, we passed a farm where a kid had been killed in an incident with a hay baler. Many of my parents’ friends and peers were working by age eight or ten on the farms they would later inherit. The family on the next farm down had experienced loss around that same time. “The kid fell into the silo,” Mom explained. “And the father jumped in after him.”

In 2011, I wrote: “Many aspects of my identity trace back to my mother - who grew up in a tiny, low-income farming town in upstate New York three miles down the road from my dad. They both wound up in the same kindergarten class at the local K-12 school. Because of strong test scores, Mom received an opportunity to get out and to attend a prestigious Engineering school - when she didn’t ‘even know what Engineering was’ - on scholarship, entered Chemical Engineering as one of very few women in her field and in her company, and did not leave until

retirement. Due to my mom's job options, I was born and grew up in an overwhelmingly White, middle-class suburb in Vermont."

In 2021, after several in-depth conversations with Mom over the past ten years, including one two months ago about an early draft of this vignette, I tell her story differently. The 2011 telling was accurate, and I would now elaborate that my mother felt incredibly fortunate, as a low-income student, to have the opportunity to go to "such a fancy school." (She had skipped her interview with MIT, convinced that would never be possible.) She and her parents worked to cobble together the necessary funds for her to enroll for four years, which included Mom dedicating hours each week to work study on campus and applying for scholarships, and Papa and Grandma tightening their already-tight proverbial belts. Throughout her university experience, Mom's mostly male classmates regularly made resentful comments like "Oh, you'll get a job easily because you're a woman."

There is also more to the story, which in the spirit of multiple co-existing truths Mom is able to acknowledge, too. While my she experienced class- and gender-based challenges, framing her experiences and their generational impact on me as a combination of resilience, achievement, and chance is insufficient.

In the 1970s, when my mother was in high school, Engineering schools were pressured to accept more women; as has continued to be the case in the present day for affirmative action-style interventions, White women benefited the most from this push (Massie, 2016). This opportunity also resulted in the sexist backlash described above. My mother's Whiteness - as it showed up in her appearance, her blonde hair, her name (even in comparison to my father's unmistakably Polish surname), her family's access and social capital even in a poor farming town, and her test scores - absolutely contributed to her opportunity and to my generational benefit in terms of socioeconomic class, my relationship with education, my associations with education, and my parents' knowledge of the often-unstated expectations of what Lisa Delpit (2006) called "cultures of power." As I have learned more about the connections between race and class mobility, including the ability to accrue social capital, I can recognize this.

In 2020, my mother called me, frustrated by her recent Facebook argument with a woman she went to high school with and who still lives in the same small town. Mom and Dad explain that they have continued unlearning and relearning about the town of their origins, citing their children as catalysts for their growth - via an intrafamilial process requiring a painful, whole-scale demolition to carve out spaces for new relationships and new ways of being and seeing. My father says: "The prison employs most of the people in the town who aren't farmers. And that is the only place they have ever seen or encountered People of Color." I think of Michelle Alexander's (2010) indictment of the racist mass incarceration complex, and of Ibram X. Kendi's (2016) description of how, in the early days of what is now widely called the United States, White elites and politicians began to

generate and spread racist narratives to deliberately disrupt the potential alliance of the working class or poor people across all races by fomenting racist superiority among the White working class. I resolve to visit this town again sometime, as an adult, with a different purpose than my childhood visits to Grandma and Papa's: To re-examine this part of my life and [hi]story.

In the conversation, Dad adds: "I did not meet a Black person in my life until I went to college." My mother corrects him, noting that there was a biracial family in their small town, whose children attended their very small school and whose Black father was the janitor at their school. Why had they been convinced for so long that they had never met any People of Color until college? "We didn't think of them as Black. That was what we thought we were supposed to do." We discuss the implications of this; Mom now wonders what that felt like for the members of that family.

Through this conversation, my parents trace the way in which they were indoctrinated into "not seeing race," as so many of us White people have internalized, back to this local family. When they moved to Vermont, this internalization extended into the sense that they shouldn't really talk about race or sexuality in our family even when they noticed it. Despite that pressure, they made occasional attempts, but did not know exactly what to do in the face of my young resistance. When they referred to one of my first grade friends as Black, I insisted "No, he's not, he's medium brown." The conversation ended there.

My family's narrative and collective memory has evolved in direct proportion to our building of stamina in talking about race together. What once was an utter absence of race talk created the impression that race was not a factor in mine or my parents' lives - what Milner (2017) would call the null curriculum, and what Michael (2015) and DiAngelo (2018) referred to as the White tendency to assume that race is a factor only for People of Color. This shifted to initial fumbblings - "I can't really remember race or racial tension in those early years..." - and then to the present day, where I have only just begun to understand "what whiteness does to reality, or, rather, its memory" (Rankine, 2020, p. 123).

Lorde and Crenshaw furthered the cause of activists and researchers who proclaim that none of us will ever be free until the most marginalized among us are free; to pursue liberation and the end to oppressive systems, intersectional activists dispose of respectability politics and amplify the voices of those most harmed by these systems – not only to protect these people, but to center them in leadership (Center for

Constitutional Rights, 2020). This is not a call for superficial representation but a recognition of unique and invaluable perspectives, voices, knowledge, and skills.

This legacy has never been more important or relevant than in the spring of 2021, when the United States continues to grapple with what Dr. Roxane Gay (2020) proclaimed to be two pandemics – Coronavirus (COVID-19) and racism, most insidiously anti-Blackness. Leaders for transformative justice in both of these fights call for intersectional approaches that continue to be misunderstood or dismissed by a wide range of Americans.

Crenshaw lambasts the generalized response by United States officials to the havoc wreaked by Coronavirus. In her series “Under the Blacklight,” she and Professor Eddie Glaude, Jr. insist that our collective response to disaster must be grounded in an understanding of differentiated harm, in order to address where the disaster is causing the most damage (African American Policy Forum, 2020). In the case of COVID-19, quite evidently Black and Indigenous communities, and more precisely older women in both communities, have been overwhelmingly and disproportionately devastated by the pandemic in the United States (African American Policy Forum, 2020). When this differential pain inflicted by Coronavirus has been acknowledged by U.S. officials at all, it has been erroneously implied to result from an intrinsic problem or issue within Black and Indigenous bodies and communities rather than from intersectional oppressions – racism, sexism, ageism, and more – that make these specific communities vulnerable (African American Policy Forum, 2020). Simultaneously, the United States unemployment system has found itself overloaded, with unprecedented numbers of American citizens out of jobs (Duffin & Smith, 2020). Between the financial and health

repercussions of unemployment – particularly in a capitalist system where health care often relies upon employers – and the absence of alternative support structures for workers such as domestic workers, Women of Color have been disproportionately put in impossible situations during and devastated by the pandemic (African American Policy Forum, 2020; Erickson, 2020). Only intersectional approaches will enable us to identify and support those who are the most harmed by Coronavirus.

A friend called me one evening in late April 2020, having seen the first of what would become many headlines naming the racial inequities in COVID-19 illness and deaths. “This is it,” she said, “Now that everyone knows that we Black people are dying the most from Coronavirus, this country will stop caring about it.” The reasonableness of this point and terrifying likelihood of its truth can be traced to many disasters. From Hurricane Katrina to HIV/AIDS, throughout history the United States at large - politicians, media, school curriculum, and more - has illustrated that which population is suffering makes all the difference in how tragedy is treated. This plays out on an individual basis, too. Another friend studied the phenomenon of missing White girls, examining the mass panic that ensued in 2005 when Natalee Holloway disappeared while on a vacation in Aruba. In 2006, Holloway’s father published a book titled Aruba: The Tragic Untold Story of Natalee Holloway and Corruption in Paradise, literally laying claim to an entire Caribbean island in service of his narrative about his missing, White daughter; meanwhile, cases of missing Black girls and women remain underreported and relatively invisible (Charles, 2019).

In 2009, one of my middle school students shared that they had attended a funeral over the weekend for a cousin who had been killed. This was, she said, her eighth or ninth funeral that year. As of 2020, I have experienced the death of family or friends perhaps ten times in my life - only a couple devastatingly premature, violent, or unexpected, and none at the hands of the State. I am one year older as I write this than the number that serves as the current life expectancy for Transgender Women of Color (Arheghan, 2018). I have not experienced the loss, death, or grief that almost all of the People of Color in my life, especially Black people, have experienced in the same span of time.

In 2020, I read Claudia Rankine’s Just Us. She explains that to White people, equality can feel like a loss, or an attack because of our lack of perspective and our entitlement. She describes the perceived loss of White male privilege as “simply a white life in which no one died.” While I spent my life until very recently within myself despairing the hopelessness of my own future, I am still here. My trans, queer body is allowed to live - has been given a pathway out of

despair - has not been consumed by the specter of death - in large part because of my Whiteness and assumed cisgender maleness (Keenan, 2017).

The convergence of racial, economic, and other forms of injustice during the Coronavirus pandemic arguably created the conditions for organized, widespread outrage in response to the second pandemic of anti-Black racism. An ongoing, country-wide movement for Black lives escalated in numbers and visibility after unarmed Black man George Floyd was killed by Officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020; three other police officers looked on as Chauvin held Floyd on the ground with his knee on Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes, killing Floyd (McLaughlin, 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement, founded by Black women Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors - two of whom also identify as queer - in the wake of the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer in 2013, was among the leaders of what as of September 6, 2020 had reached 100 consecutive days of mass uprisings in the form of protests, demonstrations, marches, rallies, vigils, and more across the United States.

From its inception, Black Lives Matter has asserted a fundamentally intersectional approach - that all Black lives must matter – but even in June 2020, the case of unarmed Black woman Breonna Taylor, who was killed in her own home by Louisville police officers in March 2020, remained marginalized amidst protests of Floyd's death (Gupta, 2020; Chotiner, 2020). The disparate response from BLM supporters to Taylor's death versus Floyd's paralleled a more systemic response: On September 24th, 2020, over six months after officers Myles Cosgrove, Jonathan Mattingly, and Brett Hankinson used a battering ram to enter Taylor's home and shot her eight times, only one officer - Hankinson - was indicted by a grand jury, and for wanton endangerment of Taylor's

neighbors rather than any charge relating to Taylor's death (Berman, Iati, Hauslohner, McMillan, Bailey, Knowles, Kornfield, & Bella, 2020). By September 29th it had emerged that Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron had previously lied about having encouraged the grand jury to consider murder charges in Taylor's death (Knowles & Iati, 2020). Tamika Mallory, one of the leaders of racial justice organization Until Freedom, protested and grieved Taylor's death and the absence of justice for Black women, citing the betrayal of the system as a whole - including Black men like Cameron who bolster it by protecting the police (Connelly, 2020).

Moreover, despite the 15,000 protesters who gathered at the Brooklyn Museum on June 14, 2020, to march on behalf of Black trans lives, the current rebellion for Black lives continues to experience backlash from those with the misconception that naming or prioritizing cisgender female, queer, transgender, and disabled Black lives that have also been lost to racist violence – including those of Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Layleen Polanco, and Nina Pop – undermines, distracts, or detracts from the Black Lives Matter movement (Paz & Astor, 2020; Milan, 2016; Branson-Potts & Stiles, 2020).

There is a long history of racial justice (particularly Black) movements and LGBTQ+ movements being framed as mutually exclusive and potentially even at odds with each other – including from within the movements themselves (Kiesling, 2017). Some Black rights activists during the Civil Rights movement perpetuated the notion that the inclusion of Black LGBTQ+ voices would distract from or divide the movement. Most famously, Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver leveled homophobia-laced criticisms at gay, Black writer James Baldwin, accusing Baldwin of imposing his own perversity and emasculation onto the Black freedom movement (Cleaver, 1999; Glaude Jr., 2020). Since

the inception of early homophile organizations like the Mattachine Society, People of Color and transgender or gender expansive people have often been excluded from respectability-oriented, White- and cisgender-dominated Gay Rights spaces (Peacock 2016; Kiesling, 2017; Paz & Astor 2020). While current, pop culture continues to appropriate and profit from concepts emerging from Black, queer, trans, and gender expansive communities - including “shade,” vogue and other aspects of ballroom culture, forms of “reading,” and others - with very few exceptions and despite some progress, LGBTQ+ representation remains overwhelmingly White, cisgender, and male (Lange, Duran, & Jackson, 2019). In both racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights movements, queer and trans People of Color continue to be invisibilized or sidelined, though they have persisted in critical roles throughout the history of both struggles despite hostilities from within – including in the persevering Civil Rights legacy of queer activists like Baldwin and Bayard Rustin and the 1969 Stonewall uprising against police brutality, led by transgender and gender expansive (TGE) People of Color (Paz & Astor, 2020). Histories of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), Latinx, and Indigenous LGBTQ+ communities and leaders remain often omitted from wider public visibility or school curricula despite the fact that these communities have been vibrant and have impacted the present United States as we know it throughout history (Erickson-Schroth & Davis, 2021).

Audre Lorde’s statement at Harvard in 1982 suggested that attempts to make any movement “single-issue” will fail to reach the ultimate goal, and we see examples of this failure, in spite of strides, in the wake of the 20th century’s Civil Rights and Gay Rights movements: LGBTQ+ People of Color, and most specifically Black, transgender women,

34% of whom live in extreme poverty compared to 9% of non-transgender Black people, remain among the most disenfranchised groups in the United States (Sonoma, 2019). For intersectionally marginalized young people, surviving and striving to thrive in the United States present particular challenges. The Black Lives Matter movement has demanded justice for the devastating numbers of Black children subjected to state-sanctioned violence, including 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot and killed by Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann while playing with a toy gun (Ly & Hanna, 2014). However, differences in public outcry around the violence experienced by Youth of Color have also often fallen along identity lines. The 2003 hate crime murder of 15-year-old Black lesbian Sakia Gunn in Newark barely registered on the media radar (11 stories in major newspapers or broadcast outlets in the two months following her death), particularly in contrast to the uproar surrounding the 1998 killing of White, gay teenager Matthew Shepard (507 stories in major newspapers and broadcast outlets in the two months after his death) (Goodman, 2003).

Intersectional thinking demands the question: In light of the persistent struggle of queer, TGE, and cisgender female Black people, can any single-issue social movement claim to have truly succeeded? What progress can be claimed without being violently reductive of these stark realities for those living at the intersections of multiple oppressed identities?

When Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" project emerged in 2010, my friends and I were not really feeling it. After all: For which queer and transgender people does life simply "get better" (Love, 2019)? At that time, gay marriage would not be legalized until 2015, and there was a long history of allegedly LGBTQ advocates and organization pouring millions of dollars into the marriage fight at the direct expense of LGBTQ+ People of Color, youth, incarcerated folks, and transgender people. In 2002, around the same time I testified in Hartford on behalf of TGE

educators and just before I moved to Brooklyn to begin teaching there, gay and lesbian activists in New York fighting for protections against discrimination compromised by sweeping transgender protections off the table (Greenhouse, 2013).

The thing is: “It” got better for me, if not until my 30s. “It” did not get better for so many people I know. My identity for so long led me to automatically distrust or dislike anyone with power (including trans men who looked like I do now). Then, through the process of more visibly embodying that, I realized that I have always had power. Nobody provided me a road map for that process, and yet I am not absolved of responsibility.

Intersectional theory, the framework for this comparative case study, incorporates elements of feminist theory, queer theory, transgender theory, and critical race feminist theory. All of these emphasize the social construction of identities, grounding their approach to identity in the anti-essentialist view that gender, race, sexual orientation, and other assumed-to-be fixed aspects of identity are not inherent truths but are produced through discourse (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978). This discursive production of identity leads to the illusion that dominant modes of identity (heterosexuality, Whiteness, cisgender identity) are inherent, essential, natural, and normal (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978). This naturalization reinforces hegemonic power structures and hierarchies that perpetuate oppressions and material differences in lived experiences along identity lines – e.g. homophobia, transphobia, racism, White supremacy (Butler, 1990). Queer theorists confirm the constructedness and performativity of identity while also recognizing its real effects and calling for liberatory approaches to oppose (continuously shifting) forms of identity-based oppression (Butler, 1990). Critical race feminists adopt a similar anti-essentialist approach to identity, while homing in on the specific positioning of women

and trans People of Color to simultaneously analyze and resist gender- and race-based oppression (Evans-Winter and Esposito, 2010).

Intersectionality theories adopt these premises, all of which position literacy and discourse as inextricable from social contexts in which meanings are produced, while providing a framework to effectively attend to the diversity within identity groups and the multitude of identities coexisting within any individual. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) originally coined intersectionality theory in order to illustrate the violent erasure, particularly to Black women such as herself, resulting from what she called the “single-axis” framework of identity common across academic fields (p. 139). In their studies utilizing intersectionality theory, Blackburn and Smith (2010) also note that intersectionality emerged from the rejection of what they refer to as “unitary” and “multiple” approaches to identity and moves researchers towards addressing multiple categories of difference (in identity, for example) by exploring the diversity within groups and attending to the dialogic relationships among individuals, groups, and systems (p. 631). Intersectionality refuses to approach individuals as though one specific strand of their identity reigns supreme over others (for example, gender as more important than and capable of being isolated from race - as a unitary approach would encourage) or as simply a sum of various additive identities (e.g. race plus gender, as a multiple approach would demand). In this way, theories of intersectionality can disrupt ways we make sense of identity that exacerbate forms of oppression (Blackburn and Smith, 2010, p. 631). According to Blackburn and Smith (2010), intersectionality requires examining who is being left out of any narrative and why (p. 632).

Queer, transgender, and feminist theoretical frameworks have often, historically been applied in single-identity ways within academia and activism. Queer theory, while often employed as a critical tool to subvert normative structures and in this way relevant in intersectional theories, continues even in much recent scholarship as exclusively a lens to gender and sexuality with no mention of race or other aspects of participants' identities (Blackburn, Clark, and Martino, 2016); over the last two decades, the absence of race critique within queer theoretical approaches in research and organizing has been scrutinized (Johnson, 2014). Feminist theory still inconsistently includes queer, transgender, non-binary, gender expansive, and gender expansive identities, as the culture war between trans-exclusionary feminists and the increasingly visible transgender population continues raging decades after cisgender feminists first began denying transgender women access to so-called feminist and women's spaces (Stone, 1992; Mock, 2014; Robertson, 2020). The history of feminist theory and activism is also riddled with race-based exclusion, with Women of Color marginalized from First and Second Wave feminist approaches, including in the Women's Suffrage movement led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony that led to White women receiving the right to vote forty-five years before Black women (Nippert, 2016; Staples, 2018, Schroth & Davis, 2021). The prioritization of White women within feminist spheres – including feminist movements, organizing, and research - continues in the present day (Hamad, 2014). Transgender theory, framed as a non-pathologizing approach to distinguish transgender individuals' unique experiences from those afforded by feminist theoretical frameworks, also often takes the form of a single-axis analysis (Lewis & Sembiante, 2019).

Intersectionality emerged out of a growing critique, particularly by Black feminist scholars like Lorde and Crenshaw in the 1970s and 1980s, of the tendency within both academia and social movements to approach race, gender, and sexuality (among all other aspects of identity) as mutually exclusive categories of lived experience (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139; Coleman, 2019). Crenshaw (1989) emphasized the importance of focusing on those who are “multiply-burdened” by intersectional identities (p. 140), and she warns that any single-axis analysis dilutes our understanding of racism, sexism, and other systems. Not only is analysis of individuals, such as Black women, distorted through a “single-axis” framework of identity; this singular approach to identity also perpetuates power hierarchies within marginalized groups by eliding differences among people within those groups (e.g. when studying “women” non-intersectionally, White women wind up in the spotlight). Crenshaw (1989) demanded new, intersectional approaches; and more recent researchers have echoed this demand, including Kiesling (2017) in her critique of the continued dominance of Whiteness in queer activism.

Watching the documentary “Disclosure” (2020) about the history of trans representation in film, I found myself unexpectedly in tears, recalling (among other not-so-distant memories that nevertheless feel far away) years of binding my chest with Ace bandages or purchased binders. In the film, trans activist Tiq Milan points out that Kimberly Peirce’s mainstream film “Boys Don’t Cry” starring Hilary Swank not only assigned a cisgender actor to play a trans person (an upsetting trend in the industry), but it entirely omitted the story of the Black man, Phillip DeVine, who was also murdered by John Lotter and Tom Nissen in 1993. It reminds me to continuously ask: What is not being shown? What has been erased or removed from the narrative? To reframe to question myself, as Michael (2015) recommends: What do I remove or erase from the narrative, and why? What has been (by myself or others) removed or erased from my own narrative?

Seven or eight years ago, a historian friend who had just learned of my Polish ancestry informed me that, during the Haitian revolution, the Polish troops who had been forced there by France turned on the imperial power and fought

alongside the Haitians. This was an example of the legacy of White co-conspiracy that I never learned about in school until Kathleen Cleaver, professor and former Black Panther, assigned our small group of undergraduates to read Mab Segrest's Memoir of a Race Traitor. Also troubling, I realized I knew almost nothing of my Polish ancestors. Around that time, my younger sister, who had taken it upon herself to connect more with our Polish heritage than I had by that point in time, designed a tattoo that we both now have etched into our skin: Rodzina. Family.

Review of Related Research

Arts-Based Methods and Freedom Dreaming

“Whiteness is in the way of seeing.”

-Claudia Rankine (2020, p. 87)

Claudia Rankine's Just Us: An American Conversation (2020) grounds much of the content underpinning this curriculum-as-method. Just Us inspired the curriculum's methodologies; the participants had opportunities to create their own art-based expressions of their choosing and to identify or take photos to represent their experiences. The series of re-storied narratives tracing participants' perceptions of Whiteness in and outside of literacy instruction were curated and organized using the guiding principles of comparative case study.

It is important to read a physical copy of Just Us. Whenever opened, the right page of the book consists of narrative text detailing various conversations in and from Rankine's own life; on the left side of each spread, corresponding to red dots strategically located in the margins on the right, Rankine offers studies, photographs, and other artifacts that illuminate the points about race and Whiteness embedded in the narratives.

As a renowned poet, Rankine's incisiveness with words leads to multiple interpretations (all important) of the above quote, which accompanies and describes a

photograph by Paul Graham. A literal whiteness, creating an effect of fading out the photograph, prohibits the viewer's ability to discern who and what the image depicts. **And**, as Graham explains that the photograph is of a Black woman who is "edited out of our seeing," the photograph illustrates how Whiteness-as-perspective obstructs our ability to see (Rankine, 2020, p. 87). Whatever the viewer's intentions, the whiteness/Whiteness remains intractable in impact. The photograph-as-metaphor captures Whiteness and its effects in a manner unattainable by literal definition - as is the tendency of metaphor (textual, visual, or aural) to shift framing, organize and clarify understanding, and create new conceptions, ideas, and meanings (Eaves, 2014, p. 148).

Throughout Just Us, Rankine illuminates that arts-based methods do not only support the imagining - the freedom dreaming - necessary in the pursuit of abolition (of oppressive institutions) and Black liberation; they are critical in such activism, advocacy, and organizing. Of a play by a Black writer and director that she attended with a White friend, during which White members of the audience were specifically named and asked to walk onstage, Rankine (2020) writes "the request is presented as conditional - what if? What if the audience, in this space of the imagination, can enact something that doesn't exist in our world?" (p. 195).

Art has always served an invaluable role in social movements, the most impactful of which, according to Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) do "what all great poetry does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society" (p. 9). Art helps the participants in any social movement remember or recognize that society does not need to be the way it is and to imagine a

different reality (Kelley, 2002, p. 9). This freedom dreaming, with the help of the arts, also makes possible a complete recalibration:

When movements have been unable to clear the clouds, it has been the poets - no matter the medium - who have succeeded in imagining the color of the sky, in rendering the kinds of dreams and futures social movements are capable of producing. Knowing the color of the sky is far more important than counting clouds. Or to put it another way, the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling (Kelley, 2002, p. 11).

Freedom dreaming stems from questioning, wondering, and imagining a new world in which liberation, particularly intersectional Black and Indigenous liberation (on which hinges the liberation of all of us), could be possible. True to these pursuits of freedom dreams as described by Kelley (2002), Rankine (2020) uses poetry to “clear the clouds,” dedicating her verses to exploring the “what if... the hypotheticals” (p.9), the “murkiness as we exist alongside each other” (p. 11), and “new, newly made / a new sentence in response to all my questions” (p. 11). Through narrative, poetry, and various artistic forms and artifacts, Rankine seeks creative methods to imagine new worlds - and to resist the White supremacist ideas of reality imposed upon her in this society.

In the realm of qualitative research, many researchers have leveraged arts-based methodologies to support the generation of narratives and possibilities that traditional methods of data collection do not accommodate. In the 1940s, the concept of artistic

inquiry was introduced into the research realm in the United States, which led to an increasingly accepted understanding of arts-based research (ABR) as ways of investigation and knowing that can illuminate phenomena that are difficult to explore thoroughly through traditional approaches (Pentassuglia, 2017, p. 3). Art-based methods in ethnographies and case study can trouble binaries (such as researcher/participant), blur boundaries across disciplines, and challenge objectivism and science-art dualisms that, as explored later, reside within and prop up hegemonic approaches to research and to the world-at-large (Sweet, 2019, p. 79; Pentassuglia, 2017, p.3, Eaves, 2014, p. 149). ABR provides tools - metaphorical refractor lenses - that make visible the often-unseen and amplify the often-silenced (Eaves, 2014, p. 149; Pentassuglia, 2017, p. 3). Additionally, arts-based methods challenge traditional understandings of (and dichotomies between) methods and results; as will be explored more later, through an emphasis on process, ABR as an approach can also lend itself to the production of poems, narratives, and other art forms as results (Sweet, 2019). This is also modeled by Rankine (2020) in her own generation of poetry, narrative, and photography (among other art forms) **both *for* analysis *and as* analysis**.

Manning (2018) offers “research-creation” to describe an approach to study that unsettles “the certainty of what counts as knowledge and what can be valued, or evaluated, as ‘contributing’ to the field” and one that through a refusal to prioritize traditional forms of knowledge (or even form in its common understanding) embraces art-as-knowing and process-as-product and thereby has the effect that “power begins to circulate differently” and “knowledge inflects to excite a rethinking, a reorienting of what

study can be (p. 9). Research-creation connects heavily to arts-based research methods in their power to upend oppressive models and understandings of research and study. Specifically, Manning (2018) notes that “when knowledge begins to escape stratification” – including through arts-based and neurodivergent modalities - its form and alignment to power shift, transforming the better term from “knowledge” to “study” or “research-creation” (p. 13). This study’s roots in research-creation are explored further in Chapter 3.

In naming the importance of art in doing justice to the nuances of embodied, lived, and intersectional experience, Rankine cites playwright Samuel Beckett, who explained that *Waiting for Godot* was his “way of finding ‘a form that accommodates the mess’” (Rankine, 2020, p. 253). Rankine (2020) wonders: “Are conversations accommodations?” (p. 253). Based on Rankine’s decision to couch her analysis of Whiteness—which through hegemonic slipperiness often eludes detection or naming—in narratives describing personal encounters, the reader infers that oral and written narratives can, in fact, constitute formal attempts to accommodate our respective messes.

However, not just any conversation will suffice to do so. As Rankine (2020) relates an exchange with her White husband, she finds that he uses all of the expected terminologies (“fragility” and more) but that in the context of the conversation such phrases seemed to get in the way of “stumbling into moments of real recognition” and of “the complicated mess of a true conversation” (p. 39). Words-as-symbols elide nuance and generalize meaning as all symbols do – “no language proceeds directly... Knowledge, as it moves through language, always comes sideways” (Manning, 2018, p. 15). Rankine undertakes the mission of moving towards nuance and locality (and intersectionality) and

away from generalization. To do this, she employs art - including personal narratives and anecdotes mostly focused on specific experiences or moments in time and space - to produce art-as-questions and art-as-possibilities, including the possibilities of liberation and affirmation.

Rankine presents narratives as evolving and demanding continuous re-visitation, rereading, and re-storying to develop new meanings. After all, a key facet of reading research illuminates that there is no pre-existing, objective reality or truth to any text; meaning making is undertaken by a reader in interaction with a text (Alvermann et al., 2011, p. 57). No new meanings are made without that interaction, and there is power and agency in being a maker of meaning (a generator of possibilities) through interaction with the narratives-texts of others. I wonder if this influenced Rankine (2020) to challenge herself and deliberately extend out of the realm of safety (specifically for a Black woman), to engage unknown White men on the topic of Whiteness as she moved through the world and its liminal spaces (p. 19). It certainly influenced me to require the reader to actively engage in this manner with the narratives in this study.

In 2017, two days after White supremacist James Fields drove his car into anti-racist protesters and killed Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, I visited friends there. Both White, this queer couple had resided in town for less than a year but had immediately gotten involved with the activists vying to remove the city's statue of Confederate Robert E. Lee. They were coming off a day of organizing bailouts for arrested protesters and grieving the racist violence that ensued. Late into the night, they explained to me how anti-racist activists had warned Democratic elected officials in Charlottesville that the White supremacists (who were granted a permit for the "Unite the Right" rally during which they chanted "Jews will not replace us" and which had created the conditions for Fields' murderous actions) portended violence (James, 2018). "Jason Kessler jogs past our house at least a couple of times each week," one friend lamented, shaking her head. We spent no energy or time trying to determine whom Donald Trump was referring to when he said that there were "good people" on the White nationalist

side, and it surprised none of us when Trump later refused to denounce White supremacy in a debate against Joe Biden (James, 2018).

As of April 2021, anti-racist protests were still ongoing in New York City and across the country, supported by online “Justice for George” organizing sites on social media platforms. These protests not only surrounded the trial of Derek Chauvin but the severe escalation of violence against Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) people and communities over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Activists and educators across social media noted that anti-Asian bigotry far predated COVID-19 and has often been fueled by politicians and large media outlets: In the early days of the Coronavirus pandemic, then-President Trump referred publicly to COVID-19 as “kung flu” and as “the Chinese virus” (Rogers, Jakes, & Swanson, 2021). The Humanities teachers in my school collaborated to develop lessons and future curriculum around not only the rise in anti-AAPI hate and oppression, but AAPI identities, stories, and histories.

Whiteness and Comparative Case Study

“I had refused to let the reality he was insisting on be my reality.”

-Rankine, 2020, p. 51

Freedom dreaming necessitates a fundamental resistance to White hegemonic dominance, as Rankine touches upon in this line describing her conversation with a White man that took place on an airplane. She describes such circumstances as regular (if not continuous) occurrences in which another person’s Whiteness has rendered her personhood as a Black woman invisible to them and simultaneously imbued them with utter confidence that their (inherently limited) perspective is universal and objectively real - the “normal” way of seeing. Central to Rankine’s project is resisting the assumption that a White person’s truth is the barometer of normalcy; central to the work of intersectional, social movements for justice writ large is interrogating what “normal” means and who defines it (Kelley, 2002, p. 5). Both pursuits require the proactive uncovering and dismantling of Whiteness.

Whiteness is **both** constructed **and** real. There are no actual biological or physiological differences across races, though the myth of inherent racial differences was deliberately crafted and continues to be propagated. White people in power in the colonized land that is now commonly called the United States of America, arguably starting with Thomas Jefferson, commissioned scientists to embark upon what would become a long history of eugenics in an attempt to reconcile the hypocrisy of a country declaring equality while enslaving Black people and murdering Indigenous people (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 16). In 1787, a medical manual published a treatise by Benjamin Moseley claiming that Black people had a higher pain tolerance than White people, a myth that a 2016 study illuminated still persists among White doctors and causes their systematic undertreatment of Black pain (Rankine, 2020, p. 152; Hoffman, Trawalter, Axt, & Oliver, 2016). The horrifying practices of racist experimentation, mutilation, and sterilization of Black and Brown people and the glorification of this legacy continue to function to establish and maintain White superiority and dominance in the United States. In 2020, immigrants detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in a facility in rural Georgia reported they were pressured or forced into unwanted hysterectomies (Dickerson, Wessler, & Jordan, 2020); not until 2018 was the statue of eugenicist gynecologist J. Marion Sims removed from New York City's Central Park (Marcius & Tracy, 2018).

The myth of biological, racial difference was (and is) leveraged by White people to justify inequities in policy that had and has devastating material impacts on People of Color, particularly Black and Indigenous communities. For just one specific example of the impact of policy, an exploration of citizenship illuminates one of the mechanisms by

which Whiteness (as we now know it) was created - directly at the expense of those categorized as Other. The Naturalization Act of 1790, restricting citizenship to free, White people, developed into a number of other exclusive immigration acts through time (Rankine, 2020, p. 15). Even after slavery was abolished, and up to the present day, policy has either consolidated and incorporated people into Whiteness (e.g. Italian, Irish, Slavic people) or excluded them from it (Rankine, 2020, p. 17). Japanese Americans were explicitly excluded from citizenship in 1922 and Asian Indians in 1923, because people who were already accepted as White self-authorized themselves to decide who else could be White (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 17). With citizenship, which for most of the history of the United States necessitated Whiteness, came opportunities to accumulate wealth and property, and opportunities to govern, among other privileges, which in turn created opportunities to pass on wealth, property, and political power through generations that were not afforded Black people, Brown people, Indigenous people, Asian-Americans or Pacific Islanders (Takaki, 1993). White privilege, a term popularized for the mainstream public by Peggy McIntosh in 1988, remains real and pervasive; McIntosh (1988) enumerates fifty concrete, quotidian examples of how she experiences and benefits from this privilege.

Historians, activists, and writers tend to agree on the general uselessness of White guilt. Similarly, there seems to be no inherent value to White confession or White self-flagellation - arguably, without action, change, and repair, depending on the audience White confession can just add emotional strain to People of Color.

This is not to say many People of Color do not find White confession or White guilt entertaining or satisfying. Ziwe Fumudoh's show "Baited" features Fumudoh grilling White guests about race and racism - with a rapid-fire series of questions like "How many Black friends do you have?" and "Name five Asian people" - often to the White guest's utter embarrassment. On Fumudoh's similar

Instagram live comedy, White chef Alison Roman - recently in the spotlight and on the proverbial chopping block for disparaging remarks about Chrissy Teigen and Marie Kondo - fumbled on the question “What do you qualitatively like about Black people?” (Desta, 2020).

Why would White guests, knowing exactly what awaits them going in, agree to be on the show? Why would they not, at the very least, be better prepared? Walking through Prospect Park and talking with friends, we could not help but think there is an aspect of White people seeking and expecting absolution through confession and public humiliation. This phenomenon also might reflect the degree to which the White psyche has internalized the myth that punishment teaches (anything) or repairs or heals (anyone). And, come to think of it - if I am in control of when I subject myself to such punishment, and by whom, and in what form, is it even punishment at all, or has it become something else?

Racist mentalities and beliefs about inherent racial difference persist in the present day in countless forms - from White parents on the Upper West Side of New York City who resist school integration (more on this later), to assumptions that the disproportionate incarceration rates of Black Americans reflect Black peoples’ inclination towards criminality, to justifications for inequitable unemployment and poverty rates (Alexander, 2010). The racist framing of the inquiry into these phenomena - e.g. “what is wrong with Black people?,” which hearkens back to the invention of “the Negro problem,” also the title of W.E.B. Dubois’ seminal book in 1903 - produces its own racist conclusions (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 16; Kendi, 2016). Black writers have long demanded a re-framing: James Baldwin insisted that it was actually the job of White people to explore what it means to be White, and Richard Wright renamed “the Negro problem” to be a definitively White problem (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 25). Framing becomes increasingly important as one recognizes that White supremacy was founded upon and continues to be propped up by disparaging narratives about Blackness.

Whiteness-as-construct originated as a myth, and racist myths about Blackness-as-Other continue to uphold White supremacy and its real, inequitable impacts on our lives. One such myth, and “one of the oldest and most expedient forms of racism,” was and remains the dehumanizing comparison of Black people to apes, which has been perpetuated in innumerable ways - in racially-coded language in literature dating back to the inception of slavery to the present day (with white symbolizing purity and innocence, and black representing evil and ugliness); via popular stories and films like Tarzan and Planet of the Apes; by images of evolution portraying the emergence into humanity in the form of a light-skinned, White, cisgender man; and in social media references to First Lady Michelle Obama as an “ape in heels” in the 2000s (Rankine, 2020, p. 62-65; Kendi, 2016; Delpit, 2012). In order to establish dominance, Whiteness needed to create an imaginary and allegedly menacing Other, and indeed institutional Whiteness “has stereotyped blackness and used this particular image to murder by” (Rankine, 2020, p. 259). The myths and stereotypes at the root of this murderous dehumanization of the Black Other - such as the myth of higher pain tolerance - trace back to the very origins of the United States as we know it and persist to this day. This persistence is due in part to the evolution of how these racist myths are packaged and disseminated; Lee Atwater, former strategist for presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, later admitted their “Southern strategy” aspired to appeal to racist White voters over time by encoding racism, especially anti-Black racism, in terms and statements that did not explicitly name race (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 32; Rankine, 2020, p. 48). Arguably no better example of the sophistication of hegemony exists than the myth of colorblindness and this emergence of colorblind racism (as will be explored later).

Herbert Marcuse, an important mentor figure and teacher to abolitionist and academic Angela Davis (who will be discussed in more detail later), conducted a critical analysis of the power of hegemony in his pivotal book One-Dimensional Man (Kendi, 2016). This power, inextricable from capitalistic roots, has continuously grown in sophistication and the ability to effectively sustain and absolve “the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society” by turning liberty into “a powerful instrument of domination” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 9). Namely, the advancement of industrial civilization as we know it has enabled administrations to more effectively disguise repression as rational, productive, reasonable, and even “liberating,” which makes resistance by or true liberation for the people that much more difficult to imagine. The most “vexing” aspect of administration (the form hegemony takes in the context of industrial civilization), according to Marcuse (1964), is “the rational character of its irrationality” (p. 11). In the book, Marcuse attempts to unveil what hegemony stows behind the curtain and to recreate space for collective imagining. How could we freedom dream if we succumb to the produced myth that mass media outlets owned and controlled by a few wealthy individuals represent the scope of “freedom of information”? Marcuse specifically indicts hegemonic capitalism in the text, but his critique must be explicitly extended and applied to the hegemonic power of Whiteness, as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) refuses the “lie” that white supremacy is fundamentally an issue of unregulated capitalism and implies a new question: How do we imagine the country without White supremacy, when it is a force so fundamental to America that much of what we learn, or are taught, or think we know has already been constructed by it?

Whiteness-as-hegemony imbues universality to the experience, perspective, and thinking of Whiteness and White culture - and as a result, Whiteness delegitimizes, dismisses, erases, or absorbs (is internalized by) anyone or anything that appears to disrupt it or stand apart (Rankine, 2020, p. 327). Hegemonic society assumes Whiteness - whether or not it comes from or in the form of a White-identified person - to be the determinant of objectivity, logic, and truth. White people in the United States do not have universal experiences but are still often raised to believe in our individualism (and eschewing of group identity while imposing it on others) and objectivity, both of which hinge on instilled beliefs that our racial identities (as specifically White) are irrelevant (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 9).

These myths prompt those of us who are White to (predictably) respond with shock, defensiveness, or affront when our Whiteness is **named**. The tendency to shut down or deflect explicit conversations about race has become widely described as “White fragility” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 2). This immediate, negative, and highly emotional reaction to acknowledging Whiteness and White privilege derives from that privilege itself, which enables White people to hold onto a myth of Whiteness as default or universal and thereby set our privilege “outside [our]selves” (Rankine, 2020, p. 41). This setting-outside also preserves our myth of White innocence, of plausible deniability, of the notion that if I can claim “I did not know” then I am absolved of culpability. But we White people are not innocent, and our lack of knowledge should not perplex us to the extent that it does. It is Whiteness itself that, by its dominance, distorts our realities and memories to think that we know what we do not and that we remember what we prefer to (Rankine, 2020, p. 123).

Did I ever pass by or lay eyes on the statue of J. Marion Sims while venturing around or through Manhattan? Did I realize who he was, what he had done, why he was celebrated and memorialized? Did I seek that knowledge? I cannot recall, which is to say: No.

After Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in 2016, Saturday Night Live released a sketch featuring Black comedians Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock with a group of White friends on election night (Saturday Night Live, 2016). In the sketch, as Trump pulls ahead of Hillary Clinton in the electoral college, Chappelle and Rock progress through various levels of amusement at the shock expressed by their White peers. The sketch makes it clear that the White people in the room are stunned, betraying sentiments like “this is not my United States!” - while their confusion belies their ignorance about realities that are unsurprising for Black people. White shock, or “White surprise” as Cameron Esposito called it in an Instagram post, upholds the myths of White innocence and White objectivity. When confronted with the fact that our realities are not universal realities, we often crumble (Esposito, 2020).

How can I refuse to wilt when faced with realities that I do not know and have been trained not to see? When might I be inclined to succumb to White shock during this study and during my daily life as an educator - can I anticipate it and practice fortitude?

Fifty-five percent of White women who voted in the 2020 United States presidential election cast their votes for Donald Trump, up a couple of percentage points from the 2016 elections (Ralph, 2020). For these women, Trump’s comments about Charlottesville, his refusal to condemn White supremacists, his numerous sexual assault and harassment charges, his role in the separation of hundreds of undocumented immigrant children from their parents, and his racist references to Mexican people (among countless other examples) were not deal-breakers. This lends credence to the notion that they are “trapped inside the machinery that insists on the authenticity of whiteness” (Rankine, 2020, p. 301) and that an investment in that authentic Whiteness had everything to do with their allegiance.

To venture into an undeniable danger zone for transgender people (especially when the following approach is appropriated and wielded against us by others in invalidating and pathologizing ways), I consider my “socialization” as a White girl and then woman. By this, I mean the assumption by others around me that I was such - though, arguably, my relative masculinity from a young age often prompted others to treat me differently from more apparently feminine counterparts. Though treacherous territory for us trans folks, in my examination of Whiteness I have to extend intersectionally through my past: How did and does this history impact who I am and how I have become who I am?

Whiteness too often plays the role of unnamed default whose invisibility benefits White people and buttresses our power; positioning Whiteness as neutral favors Whiteness. But Marcuse (1964) would insist that “to impose Reason upon an entire society is a paradoxical and scandalous idea” (p. 9). Ruth Frankenberg explains that Whiteness is a definitive standpoint and warns us against allowing its invisibility to convince us of its universality (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 27). Singleton (2015) notes that Whiteness is usually “only talked about when it is threatened” - and arguably any time Whiteness is talked about, its power is challenged (p. 204).

Naming Whiteness is a necessary step in combating its hegemonic power, which relies on invisibility to assert universality and objectivity. This naming has long been done by People of Color, and increasingly White people are being called on to see our own Whiteness, see White culture, and take responsibility for naming it because giving a problem or force a name is critical in deflating its illusion (Rankine, 2020, p. 169). The barriers to this naming, with stakes as always far higher for People of Color than for those of us who are White, include harsh backlash; naming Whiteness or race is breaking a “cardinal rule” of White myths of individualism by generalizing White people into a collective, group identity (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 11). But if “white people don’t see their whiteness, how can they speak to it?” (Rankine, 2020, p. 67).

Whiteness makes me delusional about the realities of the world. Whiteness convinces someone like me that it is logical to call the police when I feel scared, when doing so imparts disproportionate harm in the world (we are all connected, everything is connected) and, rather than actually heal my fears this action limits my imagination in order to create the illusion of safety.

I want to examine the “unexamined beliefs” that I have been taught are universal (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 3). I do not want to live an unexamined life, as Baldwin or Socrates would describe it (Glaude, 2020). I do not want to be disconnected from the real world and the people in it. I yearn for connection and authentic connectedness.

This takes practice and unlearning, because Whiteness has gotten in the way of my seeing and will be in the way at any moment that I lose my awareness of it. This requires naming how irrational Whiteness has made - and makes - me. This demands narrative, which refuses to reduce and insists upon nuance and expanding possibility. I can employ autoethnography on a continuous reflective/reflexive loop and revisit my own narrative with a fine-toothed comb as often as I can overcome my fragility.

As Claudia Rankine (2020) writes: “There’s no outrunning the kingdom, the power, and the glory” (p. 41). There is no escaping my Whiteness, there is simply doing whatever I can to better understand it, to learn to see it and see through it and see around it, to do less harm, and, if it is possible to wield hegemonic power for good, to do that. Have I tried hard enough? Maybe I need better, or different, questions. Have I tried in the right ways? Am I trying right now?

In the project of naming Whiteness, activists and academics have developed frameworks that recognize Whiteness as a construct that has been naturalized, invisibilized, and redesigned throughout the history of the United States in order to maintain its profound power. Whiteness is, indeed, far more than just a classification of an individual’s racial identity (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 24). Glenn Singleton (2015) classifies Whiteness as color, culture, and consciousness because it not only connotes the dominant race but also “represents the standards by which our racial awareness, experiences, and perspectives are judged” (p. 187). This means that Whiteness exists and has power even in spaces where there are no White-identified people.

Because “decisions get made that reinstate white hierarchies every day,” anti-racists have developed tools to mark and make visible the culture of whiteness as a first step in challenging its power (Rankine, 2020, p. 59). These tools have enabled a detailed

description of qualities and underlying beliefs that characterize White culture and uphold White supremacy.

First, colorblind rhetoric (e.g. “I don’t see race”) understandably resonates only for those of us (White people) who have never been profiled, targeted, judged, or policed on the basis of our race. In the contemporary era in the United States, many White people receive messages as young children that it is not polite or appropriate to explicitly name or talk about race; many White people believe that colorblindness makes them “good” when it comes to race, as opposed to “bad” or racist (Tatum, 2003; DiAngelo, 2018, p. 77; Singleton, 2015, p. 208). Colorblindness did not magically appear but was a crafted White supremacist strategy. American politicians, including House speaker Newt Gingrich in 1997, began touting colorblindness as the ideal approach to race relations in the country - thereby framing anti-racism as racist for naming racial difference and inhibiting anti-racist movements that might topple or challenge existing power structures (Kendi, 2016, p.467). Judge John Harlan named colorblindness as the judicial ideal in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that upheld racist segregation laws, setting the stage for later politicians who (as captured by Atwater’s description above) revolutionized the use of coded language - like “thugs” - to refer to race without naming it and thereby propagate racist ideas to appeal to a White voter base (Rankine, 2020, p. 48; Kendi, 2016). Colorblind racism entails a refusal to acknowledge race and thereby exacerbates racism (Michael, 2015, p. 85).

Second, cultures of Whiteness value individualism and meritocracy, rather than collective interdependence and connectedness, framing achievement and opportunities as individual choices or accomplishments while eliminating structural privilege and power

from the equation (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 27-29). This has historically been leveraged by White people in power to render invisible the systemic advantages leading to the oppression of Black and Brown people, while denying the existence of White privilege and ignoring the impact of racism (systemic, intrapersonal, or internalized) on People of Color. This emphasis on “personal responsibility” emerged as a common new form of racism in the 1990s, when President Bill Clinton and public figures like Bill Cosby blamed Black people for their plight; this approach to blaming victims of racism for their own oppression has been perpetuated by most visible leaders since (Kendi, 2017, *New Democrats*).

Third, White culture’s refusal to name Whiteness, which transforms quickly into fragility when the realities of race and racism are insisted upon, often takes the form of insisting that history is not relevant. In 2019, Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell rejected the idea of paying reparations for slavery, stating that “none of us currently living are responsible” (Barrett, 2019). This common distancing of oneself from racism - “it was a long time ago” or “it wasn’t me” - functions to reduce racism to intentional acts committed against People of Color and ignore the benefits afforded White people on the backs (at times quite literally) of People of Color. As historians, researchers, and writers have illustrated, the legacy of slavery persists to the present day, in the very fabric of the country, including (and most especially) in persistent economic and political inequities. These stem from historical policies that explicitly favored White men and excluded or oppressed People of Color, such as policies that enabled Irish American immigrants to begin accruing money and occupying political offices generations before People of Color could do so (Takaki, 1993; Coates, 2014; Rankine, 2020, p. 141). Self-distancing is

grounded in and simultaneously grounds the myth that White people can avoid complicity in a racist system that has always privileged us and continues to do so. This denial prevalent in cultures of Whiteness can be combated by refusing the White-imposed isolationism that attempts to cut off connections across space and time; this can be done through the project of narration. As Rankine (2020) quotes Saidiya Hartman:

One of the things I think is true, which is a way of thinking about the afterlife of slavery in regard to how we inhabit historical time, is the sense of temporal entanglement, where the past, the present, and the future, are not discrete and cut off from one another, but rather that we live the simultaneity of that entanglement. That is almost common sense for black folk. How does one narrate that? (p. 223)

Rankine's own decision to interweave artifacts from across historical times and places within her personal narratives insists upon interdependence and temporal entanglement; the book structurally resists White culture's isolationist delusions. Rankine models why it was critical to explore a transversal axis in this comparative case study and to trace Whiteness through time and space as a phenomenon unbounded except by the time restrictions of the project itself (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). As this literature review transversally traces Whiteness through historical records and artifacts across time, this project must trace Whiteness as students see and experience it without bounds imposed by spatial limits, pre-established definitions, or my expectations.

I now realize something about my use of "colorblindness" earlier. I decide to keep this vignette located here to model the non-linearity of my thought process and to refuse to pretend that it occurred earlier than it did; it takes the form of an interruption, right here and right now, to address a previous harm. The use of

“colorblindness” in this context is inherently ableist both by appropriation and by insinuating that there is a problem with being unable to literally see. The issue that those who popularized the term “colorblind” relating to race were trying to illuminate is definitively NOT one of literal seeing – in fact, their point is precisely that literally seeing race and refusing to name or acknowledge it is at the root of this form of racism. I must find, or make, more accurate and less harmful language. I have heard this critique of the popularized use of “colorblind” before but (clearly) forgot about it. Do I not take this part of inclusion, the importance of affirming and attending to the needs of folks with various degrees or forms of blindness, seriously? Because blindness does not impact me directly or personally, do I give myself a pass to succumb to laziness and excuse-making, thinking “see, all of these published authors use this term!”?

I think about the Kumashiro (2001) quote earlier, supporting the centering of intersectionality through this project, about the tendency of efforts to right one wrong to end up perpetrating harm in a different way. I think of many movements and our slogans, which, while coming from important and justice-oriented intentions often do not account for nuance, context, or story and therefore can at times have inadvertent and undermining side effects. I think of “believe survivors,” and the number of left-leaning leaders who applauded Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and then dismissed or disparaged Tara Reade. Which survivors do we believe, and why? As adrienne maree brown (2020) notes, “It doesn’t make sense to say ‘believe all survivors’ if we don’t also remember that most of us are survivors, which includes most people who cause harm. What we mean is we are tired of being silenced, dismissed, powerless in our pain, hurt over and over. Yes. Being loud is different from being just. Being able to destroy is different from being able to generate a future where harm isn’t happening all around us.” (p. 55).

Fourth, cultures of Whiteness are often invested in binaries, particularly the good/bad binary. As Robin DiAngelo (2018) explains, this deflects White energy away from focusing on changing our racist mindsets and behaviors and towards preserving our status as “good.” This dichotomous, either/or thinking turns racism into a matter of personal identity and perception rather than systems that we are immersed in and enact (Michael, 2015, p. 112). This lends itself to White avoidance of accountability for impact, and an insistence on focusing exclusively on intentions (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 9).

Whiteness is connected to other problematic binaries, as well, including gender binaries

that White colonizing forces violently imposed upon colonized Communities of Color, who globally have a long history of gender expansive identities (Bederman, 1995; Feinberg, 1996; Schuller, 2018). This necessitates incorporating critical examinations of Whiteness and White supremacy in our pursuits of intersectional justice.

Robin DiAngelo (2018) wrote that White progressives “do the most daily damage to people of color” (p. 5). That includes me. What am I doing here, and how do I know it is not adding to this daily damage?

Claudia Rankine (2020) adds “If the structure that structures the scenario is itself racist, are the questions trick questions?” (p. 65). I am the structurer here. My attempt to pose generative - is that the opposite of trick? - questions resides in autoethnography. I already know that I am an unreliable narrator, that I don’t know what I don’t know, and that every day I know more of what I don’t know. But if the reader can get a sense of me-as-perceived-to-be (not as I see myself, but as meaning is made of my words)—and if I can carve space for student-participants to name themselves and their intersectional ways of seeing Whiteness and their beautiful freedom dreams—and if I can self-reflexively focus on my impact over intent—then the processes of this curriculum-as-method and this autoethnography could be valuable. In light of all that I have written and narrativized here, in light of the urgency, in light of the reality that I am not at risk of dying from it, there is no true option but to engage. I am not fragile. (Is my use of this term opening to or obscuring the messiness? Both?)

Whiteness, Education, and Literacy

The legacy of education in the United States is dominated by White supremacy. From the criminalization of Black literacy via bans on enslaved people learning to read or write to the compulsory enrolment of Indigenous students in boarding schools to force assimilation and disparage their Native cultures, the pursuit of literacy in the United States has been fraught with violence for People of Color (Little, 2018; Coleman, 2020). Debates continue to rage about bilingual education, primarily circling around the question of whether Spanish should be allowed into American public schools (Lam & Richards,

2020). Communities of Color resisted (and continue to resist) this violence and honed their own structures for educational and literary attainment. In the 1830s, “free” Black people in the northern part of the United States, legally restricted from formal education, created organizations and spaces for learning that evolved into professional associations and literary societies for all genders (Muhammad, 2020, p. 24). The societies adopted a collaborative approach to learning that centered social responsibility to share knowledge and “elevate others” in the community (Muhammad, 2020, p. 26). Black communities defined literacy as not only skill- and knowledge-based, but as integrally connected to power and liberation (Muhammad, 2020, p. 22).

The most often-shared narrative of the history of education in the United States, including the one I learned in my own education, ignores these innovative frameworks for literacy and liberation, which Black communities have imagined and implemented for centuries. Ongoing, Department of Education-led efforts to reform education and address educational inequities omit them. Whiteness is in the way of seeing. This is one reason this study utilized Dr. Muhammad’s Historically Relevant Literacy (HRL) framework, as will be detailed later, and was grounded on the belief that centering Black abolitionist approaches to education and liberation is critical to the liberation of everyone.

The White people and power brokers who continue to dominate the mainstream narrative (including those in many schools’ history curricula) also continue to label as progress what is simply systemic racism “repainted” - including the introduction of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, which heightened the stakes of standardized tests rooted in bias and racist origins under the guise of equality (Muhammad, 2020, p. 42). White politicians advocated for the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 while

Black communities protested, recognizing that this decision continued to put the onus on them - after all, it was often Black and Brown students who were then bused to White schools, and not the other way around - and offering their own list of demands (Cornish, 2016). Sure enough, schools in many cities across the country remain as segregated as they were around the time of *Brown v Board*, with New York City as one of the most segregated public school systems in the country. When integration is sought, Students of Color and not White students are asked to venture into unfamiliar, often unsafe territory (Cornish, 2016; Hannah-Jones, 2019; Shapiro, 2019). School segregation is now *de facto* even when and where it is not (educationally) *de jure*.

It is not difficult to see why this remains the case, especially looking closely at New York City schools. A 2017 study illustrated that most Americans perceived that there was greater economic equality across races than was the reality, with the largest misconceptions in the minds of high-income White people; a 2016 study tracked gentrification in Harlem (District 3 whose northern border is just south of my school), Hamilton Heights (where my school is located), Manhattanville, and West Harlem, noting a 55 percent increase in White, Latinx, and Asian populations and a 41 percent decrease in Black population (Rankine, 2020, p. 100). In 2018, many White, mostly liberal-identified parents living in now-gentrified District 3, anxious and enraged at the prospect of their children losing a seat at their predominantly-White middle school, vocally resisted integration via opening 25 percent of seats in the school to students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch (Rankine, 2020, p. 101). As Chana Joffe-Walt (2020) uncovers in her podcast “Nice White Parents” (in which she includes some recorded clips from the District 3 debate), the stated beliefs of White, liberal-identified

parents of students currently enrolled in New York City public schools, similarly to the same population around the time of *Brown v. Board*, state support for school integration - but not when their own children are involved. In part because the United States legal system does not recognize power dynamics and upholds equality rather than equity, what is truly a racist opportunity gap continues to be framed, through a deficit lens towards Students of Color, as an “achievement gap” (Love, 2019).

Just about every time the principal of my school, located in a different district but in close proximity to District 3, hosts a tour for prospective students, the following occurs: After walking through each classroom with predominantly Black and Brown students, a White parent in attendance asks “Where are your gifted classes?” Among the many assumptions embedded in the question is that none of the previously visited classrooms could possibly be the gifted class, which this White parent’s child would necessarily belong in.

A few follow-up questions often serve well as an initial response: “Could you explain to me what you mean?” and then “Why do you think the classrooms we visited weren’t gifted?” Inevitably, this prompts a process of fumbling to avoid naming race and to justify the question. By the time it is established that our school does not track classes, that all eighth graders engage with Regents material, that we believe all students have valuable and worthwhile gifts to share with their classes, and why - it is possible the White parent has realized that, despite the pressures on schools to pitch ourselves to gentrifying families, our school refuses to cater to them. The parent who railed against our 7th grade Humanities curriculum that names Columbus’ rape and genocide of the Taino people, insisting that Columbus “did great things, too,” also likely realized this. Nothing in teaching is or can ever be neutral; it is a series of charged and weighty decisions with implications (Milner, 2017). Which narratives am I (are we) centering, and why?

In the present day, the impact of Whiteness and White supremacy on education in the United States extends even deeper than issues of policy and integration of students. Education researchers illuminate ways in which Whiteness influences the experiences of Students of Color within classrooms and instruction. Conflicts between a student’s

culture or identity and mainstream culture as represented within the classroom – e.g. in teacher or peer assumptions, including about what constitutes literacy, informed by dominant culture – can create conflict within Students of Color and various degrees of disconnection between themselves and what feel to be hostile learning environments (Li, 2010, p. 518). Various components of race, not just race as a personal identity but also as a hierarchical system in which Whiteness is privileged, have an impact on the learning and academic experiences of Students of Color (Li, 2010). The population of American teachers is overwhelmingly and disproportionately White (Rankine, 2020, p. 258).

White educators, in particular, have been proven to have and enact racist biases. White teachers tend to have lower expectations for Black students than for similarly situated White students, a damning example of the ways in which bigotry plays out through diminished expectations (Rankine, 2020, p. 95; Delpit, 2006). Whiteness impacts communication styles, which when unexamined or assumed to be universal can negatively impact and confuse Students of Color; the power of Whiteness (the “language of power”) involves a range of implicit rules that must be made explicit for Students of Color to be able to successfully meet them (Michael, 2015, p. 68-69; Delpit 2002). Additionally, Whiteness-as-default can frame Otherness as inherently bad or lacking in value. Lisa Delpit (2006) bemoans the frequent, disparaging teachers’ framing of African American English (AAE) as incorrect or improper (despite the fact that AAE follows all of the linguistic rules required for recognition as a valid dialect) and encouraging educators to frame conversations about dialects in terms of code switching.

The indelible impact of racial inequities in education begin right away for Black students (who comprise 18% of preschool enrollment but 48% of students having

received more than one suspension by elementary school), and the subjection to inequitable discipline continues for Black boys throughout their Pre-Kindergarten to 12th grade education; “whose boys get to be boys?” (Michael, 2015, p. 64; Rankine, 2020, p. 264). Indeed, a 2016 study by the Yale Child Center found that educators most closely watched and expected behavior challenges from Black boys - even when no such behaviors occurred (Rankine, 2020, p. 166). And to shift away from a single-axis analysis and consider the impact of Whiteness and White supremacy on students with intersectionally-marginalized identities, adding to the statistics shared earlier are the data that Black girls “are among the highest-growing populations of incarcerated youth” which connects to the disproportionate discipline experience by Black girls and gender expansive youth (Muhammad, 2020, p. 39). In light of the disproportionate and punishment-focused discipline prevailing for Students of Color in American schools, perhaps even more accurate than the concept of the school-to-prison pipeline is the suggestion that schools, themselves, are already forms of prison for many Students of Color.

Studies also explore the academic harm done to students by unexamined Whiteness. Johnson’s (2013) single-subject case study of one White teacher illustrates that Whiteness is not only a fixed identity but an identity that can be and is often performed – whether or not the performance is conscious – and in the space of a classroom that performance impacts students. Appleby’s (2013) qualitative case study based on analysis of several interviews explores various ways Whiteness can be enacted by teachers in the space of a classroom and the various effects these enactments can have on students. These studies suggest that Whiteness is not an inherently bad or negative

descriptor, and that assumptions of Whiteness as normal, default, logical, and superior are extremely detrimental and often reinforced in schools. This calls all educators, most urgently White educators, to continuously interrogate, deconstruct, and unpack Whiteness ideologies in order to engage in anti-racist resistance. This study constituted an exploration of a means by which to do this.

Autoethnography and Intersectionality

I wrote the personal vignettes in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 before implementing the study. I then wrote the personal narratives in Chapter 4 during the study and those in Chapter 5 after the study. The grounding work done through autoethnography in the first three chapters here, prior to the study, were of critical importance.

Intersectional autoethnography as an explicit part of the curriculum-as-study created an imperative for the educator facilitating this curriculum with student-participants (me-as-researcher and me-as-Assistant Principal) to engage in the telling and revisiting of one's own narratives of myself and one's intersectional identities. The process of examining and developing my identities alongside students was not simply a mechanism to build trust - it is, as researchers have long asserted, absolutely necessary in culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy. This guided self-examination is especially important when directed at our dominant identities, which due to the invisibility of hegemony are often easy to leave unexamined. It is needed the most, and the most often, by those of us who are White, who might center our marginalized identities as a means to avoid addressing race and White privileges and whose understanding of ourselves and the world beyond ourselves has been so thoroughly distorted by Whiteness.

Meister (2017) attempts to model a White educator examining her own Whiteness in her critical racial autobiography, a method aligned with many models of culturally relevant pedagogy (Nieto, 2003; Li, 2010, p. 524). Within such projects, the framing of the questions that guide the exploration is significant. Michael (2015) explains the importance of White people reframing our inquiry to focus the analysis on ourselves, giving the example of a White teacher shifting from “How do I address families who discipline their children in ways I see as inconsistent with our school’s principles?” to questions that also call into question her own perspective and feelings: “Why am I uncomfortable with the discipline strategies used by the parents of some of my Black students? What should my role be, as a White person and as a teacher, when I interpret discipline strategies in Black families to be unhealthy?” (p. 36). Brooks (2018) conducts an autoethnography through an intersectional analytic lens, highlighting the commonality of autoethnography, the telling of individual stories, and intersectionality in transformative justice and the pursuit of social change (p. 32). The autoethnography inherent in this curriculum-as-study follows in these footsteps, utilizing useful tools such as inquiry, humility, and storytelling as a form of praxis in engaging in its necessary self-interrogation.

I know that Claudia Rankine (2020) is correct when she writes “white people don’t really want change if it means they need to think differently than they do about who they are” - and that I will never completely trust myself or my own motives in this work (p. 151). I engage in autoethnography while refusing the myth that I can ever be innocent or that I could ever fully mitigate or eliminate my bias. I believe I will spend my entire life—far beyond the bounds of this project—in these unfolding, overlapping cycles of

proactive unlearning. I know that this requires continuous pain, including the pain of acting as a race traitor (Segrest, 1994) and the pains of looking closely at and recognizing the damage done by Whiteness and by me - **and** also that my pain in doing this is miniscule when put in broader perspective. I believe that in addition to my ability to see, the very state of my soul and the freedom of my imagination depend upon this endeavor.

Only narrative can allow me to be “in the truth” of me, in all my realities and all of my “stumbles and slips,” and only narrative can allow for relationships among those of us with our various truths (Rankine, 2020, p. 191). This is particularly resonant in light of the fact that any attempt to erase differences between different people, and certainly people of different races, “destabilizes us” and threatens to render the collective (us) an impossibility (Rankine, 2020, p. 187). Narrative inquiry offers the only possible approach to intersectionality, then, and to embracing multiplicity - which itself takes on different meanings based on one’s positioning. For Rankine (2020), consenting “not to be a single being” could mean refusing to accept a White man’s reductive stereotypes of her; it could also allude to the “double-consciousness” of having one sense of herself and yet simultaneously grappling with the oppressive view through the eyes of the world outside of herself (p. 31). Through multiplicity of meaning, her narrative offers ways to expand ideas of intersectionality even further.

I read Claudia Rankine’s Don’t Let Me Be Lonely in an African American Literature course taught by renowned poet and essayist Elizabeth Alexander. Professor Alexander, who years later in 2009 would write and perform her poem “Praise Song for the Day” for and at President Barack Obama’s first inauguration, introduced the six or seven of us enrolled in her African American Literature class to a number of living legends: Caryl Phillips, Kwame Dawes, and Claudia Rankine herself. I remember very little of the content of the class conversation with Rankine, but her insistence on the power of narrative-poetry and a general awe at her leveraging of language indelibly impressed themselves

upon me. Reading Just Us between one and two decades later, I am reminded of what might be my favorite poem by Professor Alexander (2012), which ends with:

“Poetry (and now my voice is rising)

*is not all love, love, love,
and I’m sorry the dog died.*

*Poetry (here I hear myself loudest)
is the human voice,*

and are we not of interest to each other?”

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

“We feel part of a long lineage of projects, artists, activists, thinkers, and creators
centered on the Black experience.”

-Drew & Wortham, 2020, p. XIII

The need for models of culturally responsive pedagogy, to support all students but most urgently intersectionally marginalized students, has been proven by educators for centuries and expounded upon by researchers over the last three decades.

Race, in various forms, has an impact on the learning and academic experiences of Students of Color. Particularly as the demographics of schools in the United States continue to shift tremendously from the 1990s to the present day, educators have recognized that schools need culturally responsive instructional models to effectively address all of students’ increasingly diverse backgrounds and identities (Li, 2010, p. 515). These models necessarily center literacy instruction, as literacy is “embedded in the social, cultural, and historical contexts” in which it occurs, and developing literacy is one

“means by which individuals conduct and construct their lives in the community” and in broader society (Li, 2010, p. 516).

Teachers’ instructional, pedagogical, and curricular decisions, all of which are key elements of culturally responsive pedagogical models, have been illustrated to impact students’ reading motivation and engagement. Koonce (2017) used critical discourse analysis to analyze interviews exploring the reading motivations of five Black, female adolescents who are avid readers – and who found reading fundamentally social, enjoyed out-of-school reading more than in-school reading, who utilized books as a means of escape from daily hardship, and who were impacted by the way adults viewed them and did or did not cultivate their love of reading. Kathleen Clark’s (2017) groundbreaking study of Black students in New York City reading texts featuring African American lead characters revealed that students who read culturally relevant texts that validated their racial identities grew more quickly in reading comprehension and contextual word recognition. This study unequivocally captures the effect of engaging with texts that reflect characters with similar racial identities to themselves on African American students. In doing so, it confirms that the racial representations students are exposed to in text directly correlate to reading motivation and comprehension growth. The study connects to the epigraph for this section from *Black Futures* and builds upon the history of Black researchers like Alfred Tatum (2009), who emphasizes the urgency of developing rich textual lineages for African American boys, and Rudine Sims Bishop (1990), who coined the term “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” as a metaphor for the power of affirming and validating texts for students.

Incorporating LGBTQ+-themed texts and units into the curriculum has also been shown to increase the engagement of LGBTQ+ students (Malo-Juvera, 2016; Blackburn & Clark, 2009). Other research illustrates the potential of not just LGBT-themed literature but also queer pedagogical practices to foster inclusive classroom environments, interrogate (rather than reinforce) heteronormativity and cisnormativity, and engage students in academic and text-based discussion about sexual identity, gender expression, and gender creativity (Blackburn, Clark, & Martino, 2016).

Lewis and Sembiente (2019) emphasize the professional duty of teachers to be agents of change to promote inclusive school environments for transgender students, noting that teachers can be detrimental to the well-being and success of this population when they fail to act as allies. When teachers are provided with LGBTQ training and empowered to advocate for transgender students, teachers can act as allies and increase LGBTQ+ representation in their classroom and spread understanding about gender-expansiveness (Lewis & Sembiente 2019). When teachers intervene against bullying and actively create gender-inclusive spaces in the school, they inspire students toward “self-agency and activism” and change school culture for the better for LGBTQ+ students (Lewis & Sembiente, 2019).

Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton (2016) conducted another study simultaneously focused on LGBTQ+ populations and middle school students. The researchers used a Social Action Research methodology to analyze qualitative data gathered in interviews, and they identified seven key barriers and four critical supports for transgender and gender-creative students in schools. This study also identified specific concerns relating to support provided by White educators for Students of Color,

noting that ethnocentrism among White educators was one of the seven primary barriers to success for LGBTQ+ students. In these respects, the study captures the impact that teachers have on LGBTQ+ students' experiences of school and literacy performance and the importance of an intersectional lens. Not only does this support the need for culturally responsive teaching models, it also illuminates why these models must emphasize intersectional approaches to students.

New and emerging research focused on intersectional participant populations, and specifically focused on LGBTQ+ Students of Color, has deliberately adopted intersectional approaches. When focused on Black queer youth, numerous researchers are beginning to apply intersectional theoretical frameworks to both reflect and capture the specificity, complexity, and fullness of their participants' lived experiences and refuse to engage in the erasure of intra-group difference that Crenshaw warned us stems from single-axis approaches (Love, 2017; Lange, Duran, & Jackson, 2019; Kiesling, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989). Invoking an intersectional analysis that is attentive to systems of power and oppression is necessary to reject the historical centering of the most privileged among any single-axis identity group - White, able-bodied, cisgender, etc (Lange, Duran, & Jackson, 2019). Kiesling (2017) names specific examples of the political and justice-oriented ramifications of single-axis approaches that erase intra-group differences – a mainstream queer community that focuses exclusively on marriage, a colorblind society, and homonormativity that transforms queer identity into a synonym for Whiteness. Love (2017) noted that only an intersectional approach could adequately explore multifaceted, subversive, and messy identities and how Black queer youth reimagine spaces and disrupt normativity; the framework through which their complex identities are viewed must be

dynamic, “hyper-local, and not generalizable.” LGBTQ+ Students of Color need inclusive spaces that account for their complex and unique positioning and lived experiences – not only on campuses and in schools, but also within the spheres of policy and research (Gonzalez, 2019). Some of these studies have begun to explore how students’ “multi-faceted” identities shape their perceptions of their learning environments, which confers importance on the importance of exploring the perceptions of race and Whiteness of students with intersectional identities (Henning, Ballen, Molina, & Cotner, 2019).

In 2011, I wrote: In suburban Vermont I was predominantly surrounded by self-identified liberal-minded people, and in pre-kindergarten I learned that “racism is wrong” – but I didn’t learn what racism looks like, or how it manifests on a daily basis. In fact, race was rarely spoken about without a sense of shame or discomfort and was shrouded in an implicit “we don’t talk about those things” expectation. My upbringing in the liberal suburbs taught me that I should avoid being branded “racist” because that would make my affluent, liberal, White peers look down upon me - not that I needed to be, or should learn to be, proactively anti-racist to fight systemic injustice.

In 2020, this reflection on my upbringing in Vermont remains consistent, though I have since uncovered some vivid memories of specific moments when I was indoctrinated into Whiteness and into the belief that what I accepted as “truth” must be universally true. The first instance took place in pre-kindergarten, when teachers would have us sing a song about police that I could still perform on request as needed (it stuck):

*I’m a policeman, dressed in blue.
Here are some things I like to do:
Direct the traffic in the town,
Help the people live safe and sound.*

This song reflected my overwhelmingly White community’s relationship with police officers, which was assumed to be the logical way to view police. For anyone to challenge the veracity of the song as fundamentally representative of police, as the lived experiences of many People of Color and especially Black people in this country do, would have been dismissed in my community as absurdity. To study the indisputable history of the origins of the modern-day police as former patrols to capture escaped enslaved people would be dismissed.

The power of Whiteness is to declare “biased” any fact that does not fit one’s own world view.

In 2006, I ended up sharing this police song with one of my classes of middle school students. We had been talking about the recent murder of unarmed Black man Sean Bell by the NYPD and about the protest I had joined in Queens that weekend. A student had asked me (“Ms.” at the time) how I had come to understand there were problems with police. I shared that my only personal experiences had been with homophobia and sexism - recalling the officer who had harassed my girlfriend and me when we were holding hands. As a White person, I admitted to the class, I had been told to respect and honor police, and had even been taught songs about their heroism and goodness in the face of evil. Several students demanded to hear the song and laughed out loud when I shared the lyrics with them. One said “That’s ridiculous! The cops broke my uncle’s leg because he was sitting on our stoop.” Other students shared countless other experiences that do not happen to me.

When I explained that what truly challenged my mindset about police and the way I was brought up was a deepening knowledge of the world and of history, including about Rodney King and the Los Angeles uprising of 1992, I was stunned to learn that almost no students in the class knew of King. The standard middle school Social Studies curriculum covered only up until the Civil Rights movement - if it got there - which sparked me to create an Elective course focused on tracing police brutality and anti-racist, Black-led resistance in more recent history, starting in the 1980s. The day after I shared some of the poems from Anna Deavere Smith’s (1994) book and one-woman play Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 with the class, my White principal called me into her office. “Is this your poem?” she asked, holding up an excerpt from this Tony-nominated play by a renowned author and actor. My principal stated that someone had found the poem lying on the photocopier and had complained that it was “anti-White and anti-cop.” When I pressed her to explain how this was any different from any other text or perspective piece we might share with students, she warned “just be careful.” The explicit message was: These specific [hi]stories are dangerous. The implicit message was: ... because they challenge Whiteness.

There is no neutrality in teaching, in planning lessons, or in crafting curriculum.

Curriculum is always and inherently political, and Milner (2017) argued that there are always three curricula that exist for every one put on paper: The explicit curriculum (the intended messages or learning), the implicit curriculum (the unintended messages or learning), and the null curriculum (the learning that does not exist because students do

not have the opportunity). The teacher makes choices at every turn, creating parameters and specific framing for questions and dialogue. As explained earlier, Whiteness and White supremacy have been proven to have a significant, negative impact on students, particularly Students of Color. For these reasons, researchers and historians have developed powerful models of abolitionist teaching and culturally responsive pedagogy that are absolutely essential to pursue.

Culturally relevant pedagogy, coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1995, provided a model for instructional practice to support marginalized students, including Black students and LGBTQ+ students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Other models of culturally relevant or culturally responsive pedagogy have emerged since then, building upon Ladson-Billings' originating work. Several common tenets emerge from across these models.

First, in order to achieve at their highest potential, all students' identities must be validated, meaning that students (in their full, intersectional identities) must feel safe, seen, and validated as well as reflected by the curriculum texts they are exposed to (Li, 2010; Gay, 2000; Sims-Bishop, 1990).

Second, this means that teachers' mindsets, beliefs, actions, and words matter tremendously in both engaging all students consistently in high-level intellectual thinking and creating a culturally responsive or culturally unresponsive space in the classroom. This necessitates teachers knowing themselves and their own identities deeply and continuously interrogating their power positioning, actions, and biases and the impact these have on students and the learning environment (Nieto, 2003). It also requires teachers to invest in knowing their students deeply as people and as learners, and

centering this knowledge in planning, instruction, and interactions with students, families, and colleagues (Hammond, 2015). For intersectionally marginalized students and especially Students of Color, in terms of pedagogy, creating this culture where all students experience rigorous, intellectual engagement necessitates an emphasis on and true valuing of verbal discourse and dialogue (Hammond, 2015). As bell hooks (1994) notes, “combining the analytical and experiential is a richer way of knowing” – which means that culturally responsive educators deliberately challenge the supremacy of the written word over storytelling and oral traditions (p. 89).

Third, models of cultural responsiveness offer specific guidance around teacher language, behavior, and mindset. For one example: Intent is different from impact, and these must be differentiated. This is particularly important for White people when it comes to issues of race, when our privilege often enables us to hide behind good intentions to avoid accounting for our impact. Simply because a teacher does not believe that they enacted or imposed Whiteness in language or behavior does not mean that their student is not impacted by a perception of Whiteness. Regardless of our intentions, and often blinded by good intent, White teachers can do damage to students and their families - through perpetuating misguided White narratives about Students of Color, reaching out to the families of Students of Color only for negative disciplinary reasons, or assuming that Black, Latinx, or Native/Indigenous students have disabilities (Yoon, 2016; Cherng, 2016; Cooc, 2017; Becker & Paul, 2015) Additionally, well-intentioned teachers have a tendency to “teach about people of color only from the perspective of oppression” - which, in addition to offering a distorted and limiting view of the lives of People of

Color, can take a tremendous emotional and psychological toll on Students of Color (Michael, 2015, p. 101).

In this last example, Michael (2015) also highlights the harm done by deficit models of thinking about People of Color. Culturally responsive pedagogy demands that educators unlearn deficit models of thinking about marginalized students and internalize asset-based mindsets (Muhammad, 2020, p. 41). Koonce (2017) notes that deficit thinking pervades the field of education research, focusing on what is wrong with Black students in terms of reading and writing - but her study illustrates the power of taking an asset-based lens. Thompson's (2015) case study focused on mindsets about Multilingual Learners (MLs) reveals that all too often, teachers consider MLs to be monolithic groups (which they are not) or lower expectations for MLs in a demoralizing, stigmatizing, and isolating way. While Thompson's sample size was very small, it illustrates one example of the impact of deficit thinking about a diverse group of students. Blackburn and Clark's (2011) ethnography illustrates that proactively creating LGBTQ+-inclusive spaces and discussions can have the impact of combating homophobia, heteronormativity, and transphobia in a community or school; they found that there is a "reciprocal relationship among talk, text, and context" (p. 241). These studies illustrate the importance of culturally relevant instructional approaches and of taking an asset-based lens when exploring the relationships between Students of Color, LGBTQ+ identities, and literacy experiences. (Replacing the widely-used term "English Language Learner" with "Multilingual Learner" reflects both this asset-based thinking about students who often speak more languages than, for example, I do – and it also reinforces the fact that

enhancing language knowledge in any language will support literacy growth in them all. This is a shift that I and our staff have adopted for this reason.)

Geneva Gay's (2000) framework for culturally responsive teaching outlined six characteristics of culturally responsive lesson plans: validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (p. 35). Conceiving of an emancipatory lesson plan requires investment in curiosity about the role of abolitionist teaching and freedom dreaming in our classrooms.

Abolitionist Teaching

“Writer and activist adrienne maree brown says, ‘All social justice work is science fiction. We are imagining a world free of injustice, a world that doesn’t yet exist.’” -

Love, 2019, p. 100

Abolitionism has always involved freedom dreaming. From the original goal of uprooting and overturning the economic system of slavery utterly relied upon by White America, abolitionism has required envisioning a society that does not yet exist - and that can be quite difficult, when enmired in the real oppressions of the moment, to imagine. Abolitionists consistently encounter the barrier of the self-described liberal- or progressive-minded people who dismiss what they deem impractical. But what is more practically valuable than the power of imagination in a time of despair, and what has been more potent than coalition-building towards an inspiring vision?

Activist and academic Angela Davis became one of numerous leaders of a new abolitionist movement in the United States focused on abolishing the prison industrial complex. Prison abolition followed along the path of the slavery abolition movement and

the Civil Rights movement against Jim Crow, in part because, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution that abolished slavery except for those deemed criminals by the State, thus replacing Jim Crow and the Black Codes with mass incarceration as a primary means to systematically oppress Black and Brown people (Alexander, 2010). For Davis (2003), it was critical to recognize that this work was not new and that while there was a need to reimagine the world there were some excellent ideas and tools from predecessors that could support this re-envisioning. Davis built upon the work of other previous and contemporary abolitionists, and along with leaders like Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Mariame Kaba aims to develop the collective imagination to challenge the narrative that “prison is considered an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives” (p. 9). Geographer Gilmore reinforces the need to disabuse us (collectively) of this misconception and explains the centrality of Black liberation to this work: “When Black lives matter, everybody lives better” (Kumanyika, 2020).

Audre Lorde famously stated the personal is political, and I remember latching onto this phrase while watching Lizzie Borden’s “Born in Flames” during a college class about feminist experimental films. Lorde penned Zami: A New Spelling of My Name as a combination of myth, biography, and history; Borden’s fictional feminist documentary playfully tore apart standard genre while leveraging the transformative power of narrative (Borden, 1983; Lorde, 1982). Monique Wittig’s characters in her novel The Lesbian Body lovingly consumed each others’ bodies; Chantal Akerman’s queer sex scene in “Je Tu Il Elle” more closely resembled a fight (Wittig, 1973; Akerman, 1974). A few years later, watching Akerman’s “Jeanne Dielman” at Film Forum in Manhattan, I was struck again by her melding and juxtaposing of the mundane and the violent (Akerman, 1975). The feminist legacy of blurring lines and refusing categorical boundaries resonated with me. There are no boundaries between self and other, between past and present; we are unbounded and we are interdependent. The abolition of oppression must be engaged with everywhere at all times - inside of me as well as outside. It means “paying attention to where we feel and/or practice policing and surveillance outside of the state” (brown, 2020, p. 12).

As a White person, if I am not pushing myself to a point of discomfort and the institutions I am a part of to a point of fear or retaliation, I do not think I am doing what is necessary for those whom Love (2019) describes as “dark children.” That which is urgent for the most marginalized among us will always demand more than discomfort from institutions (and myself); and whatever I am afraid of will always pale in comparison to the real ramifications of silence for those same people and communities. In these limited personal narratives, I aim to (need to) explore those that I know I am least inclined to acknowledge to myself or to share publicly – which often do not align with what the world-at-large expects. What makes me harbor fear, anxiety, shame, or self-doubt?

Years ago, I happened to be introduced to cocaine and molly and began regularly using them. For the year or so thereafter, I was struggling with substance abuse but not thinking I was struggling, having been misled by a dominant, linear narrative of addiction to believe that I did not fit into the “addict” category. I impressed myself with my ability to remain undetected.

For that year, I drifted away from my closest friends and inadvertently replaced them, subconsciously investing all my time with new people who would not tell me I had a drug problem. I persisted for about a year of regularly running through my steady paycheck and subsisting on granola bars for the three days leading up to the next check, not only indifferent to a future but unable to see one - and yet too embarrassed to tell anyone I loved.

One day I found myself skipping a friend’s back-in-town dinner and lying to her about where I was while I sat for hours in an apartment full of people I barely knew, some of whom were spiraling downwards while awaiting a drug delivery. As I watched a doctoral student roll around on the floor, moaning “where is it?”, I experienced a sudden jolt that I remain thankful for to this day even though I cannot explain it. I suddenly stood up, wrestled my 80 dollars from the collection stored in one extremely intoxicated person’s pocket, and walked out of the apartment. I went directly to share with my close friends honestly, for the first time in a year, what I had been doing and that I knew it needed to stop.

I had a job with benefits but no money; several friends had loaned me small amounts of money that I owed them; I was ignoring calls from collections agents and credit card companies every day. Whiteness is having the mobility and opportunity to go from that state to buying a home in a decade.

Whiteness pervades this story and my experience of it: The specific drugs I had access to. My regular paycheck. My undetectability, my assumed innocence, my unlikelihood of getting caught in all realms of my life. The likelihood that when I share this story here, addiction will be recognized as an issue of mental health and not one of criminality. My avoidance of hospitalization, arrest, violence, eviction, and chemical dependency.

*I attempt to lean into these narratives with ample self-knowledge of the dusty corners I have to explore **and** to do so without succumbing to self-indulgence or delusions of confessional absolution.*

George Floyd's death in May 2020, the video of which went viral and joined a growing cache of damning footage of anti-Black police brutality, catapulted abolitionist ideas into a more mainstream visibility (as recently as 2003, Davis had noted that most people were shocked to hear about the long history of prison abolitionism) and sparked successful campaigns to defund police in numerous cities across the country (Davis, 2003, p. 9; Levin, 2020). Kaba published an Opinion piece titled "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police" in the *NY Times*, with the caption "Because reform won't happen" (Kaba, 2020). Campaign Zero released its "8 Can't Wait" campaign, advocating eight reforms to reduce deaths at the hands of police, and the emergent #8toAbolition challenged the approach as misleading, inaccurate, and treading old ground with reforms that had already failed in police precincts nationwide. #8toAbolition insisted that for criminalized communities, abolition cannot wait, noting that "a better world is possible" (Haymarket Books 2020). K Agbebiyi, an organizer with #8toAbolition, connected their movement with a long history of Black feminist and abolitionist thinkers, with storytelling and imagining possibilities, and with transformative justice that values and centers the leadership of the most intersectionally- marginalized among us (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2020). Ruth Wilson Gilmore cites the enhanced social functions of police that they are not equipped to handle (e.g. addressing mental health crises) in combination with the increasing policing functions of other institutions such as schools - which ramps up the so-called school-to-prison pipeline mentioned earlier (Kumanyika, 2020).

On May 30, 2020, the Saturday after George Floyd's murder, I emerged from my apartment for the first time in two months (due to the COVID stay-at-home measures in place from March) to join the large group of protesters in Flatbush, Brooklyn. Advocates walked through the crowd to distribute masks (though everyone in sight was wearing one), hand sanitizer, and water. Local organizers including Equality 4 Flatbush led the crowd in chanting Assata's "It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains" (Shakur, 2001). This chant was not for me, I knew - and I contributed to the collective voice. NYPD drones flew over the crowd, and police watched through telescopes on nearby rooftops.

The organizers then led us in marching south on Flatbush Avenue, deeper into a predominantly Black neighborhood where residents displayed various signs of solidarity from inside and outside of buildings - raised fists, signs, shouts, tears - and even from the cars stuck in traffic. About fifteen blocks down, the march turned left, and I inferred from murmurings earlier that the plan would be to take another left onto Bedford Avenue to head back north towards a gathering point at Grand Army Plaza. A wall of police officers with helmets and riot shields greeted us when we came to Bedford Avenue. What ensued, I later learned, was strategic.

First, intimidation and separation: The riot gear and over-the-top numbers of police (I personally saw more than fifty full NYPD vehicles in the span of two hours) produced a sense of overwhelm at the sheer resources before us. A helicopter flew terrifyingly low over us, gusting wind and scattering the group down the next block. An NYPD car attempted to force its way through and over a small group who had been pushed aside by the helicopter. I caught this on video. [A few hours later, at 8 pm that evening, less than two miles north on Flatbush Avenue, an NYPD squad car rammed through a barricade and into a collection of unarmed protesters. I saw the footage late that night. Shortly afterwards, I watched Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio shame protesters, saying "I do believe the NYPD has acted appropriately."]

Then, divide and conquer: After about half of the march had continued north, the police pulled out a woman from the crowd of protesters, handcuffed her, and led her to a vehicle. The second part of the march, of which I was a part, demanded that the arrested protester be released, the chants of "Let her go!" underscoring the fact that we were all exercising a constitutional right to peacefully protest.

Then, close in slowly: A member of the upper ranks (I could tell by his white uniform shirt) loudly yelled the orders "Box them in, all of them! On the sidewalks, too!" As a small line of police in front of me began to approach, a Black woman organizer next to me shouted "White people, to the front!" I stepped out, not at all certain of what I was doing or supposed to do (and later able to clearly recognize how little I understood about organizing) only to find the police that had been advancing had shifted their focus in another direction. I

moved towards a sidewalk, but that was being boxed in. A police officer twenty feet away used his left hand to pull down the face mask of a Black man who was standing still with his arms straight up in the air; the officer then used his right hand to stream pepper spray directly into the man's face.

Following a moment of panic about potential arrest—as an educator, would I lose my job? As a trans person, where would I be held?—I managed to make my way around a nearby corner and sneak out of the fray. On the next block, I passed one of the organizers, a Black woman who had spoken to the crowd passionately and powerfully two hours earlier. She was speaking with another Black woman. I impulsively stopped, saying “Excuse me, thank you for what you said earlier...” As they both glanced up from their phones at me, it hit me: They are in the middle of a battle. They are strategizing. Their people are under attack by a massive, growing police force a block away. They do not know me or my intentions. I am a masked, White person. I am leaving to go home to safety; they most certainly (all low-inference data could point to this) are not. What is wrong with me?

Once I caught myself, too late, I hurried on. Whiteness - White politeness culture, White self-absorption, White arrogance - was in the way of my seeing.

On social media later, I did not include this last part. (I wonder if I had already written it out of my narrative. I had to make the effort to revisit, self-interrogate, and catch these would-be erasures.) In my post, I described the encounter with the NYPD, noting: “And this was with many of us White people there, and I can consider it a minor glimpse into the sheer brutality and powerlessness Black and Indigenous people feel in the face of police every day.”

Abolitionist teaching derives in part from a focused effort to dismantle this policing, which is particularly palpable in predominantly Black and Brown schools. Policing, however, does not only occur through disproportionate discipline but is enacted through other forms of violence in schools and classrooms - cleaving abolitionist teaching to models of culturally responsive pedagogy. Abolitionist teaching seeks to dismantle oppressive systems - including prisons, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, mass incarceration, and what Bettina Love (2019) terms “the educational survival complex” (p. 89) - and the thinking, beliefs, and actions that uphold them. Like any emancipatory pursuit, abolitionist teachers must not expend all of their energy tearing down. As Love

(2019) quotes Ella Baker, the “reduction of injustice is not the same as freedom” - and freedom is the goal of abolitionist teaching (p. 89). Abolitionist teaching involves freedom dreaming in solidarity with a community; and families must be important members of this community (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). This connects to Gay’s (2000) expectation that culturally responsive lessons be emancipatory and transformative. As Love (2019) also notes, joy is absolutely fundamental to abolitionist teaching, including the joys of solidarity, camaraderie, and justice (p. 121).

Aligned with the quote from adrienne maree brown above, freedom dreaming and blazing new paths forward to “show dark children they are loved in this world, and... establish an educational system that works for everyone” are the generative forces behind abolitionist teaching (Love, 2019, p. 89). This entails finding beauty in struggle, recognizing the complexity of dismantling oppressive, hegemonic systems and grounded in the certainty that freedom dreams are “critical and imaginative dreams of collective resistance (Love, 2019, p. 101).

Abolitionist teaching overlaps significantly with models of culturally responsive pedagogy and concerns itself with their enactment in schools and classrooms. This requires, as Gay (2000) and Sims-Bishop (1990) emphasized, validating “dark students” by celebrating and affirming their full selves - “past, present, and future” (Love, 2019, p. 121). It also necessitates educators’ self-knowledge, willingness to self-critique, and continuous self-reflection. Aligned with Nieto’s (2003) emphasis on teaching as autobiography and DiAngelo’s (2018) call for White people to resist the myth of our fragility, abolitionist teaching “asks us to question the piece of the oppressor that lives in all of us” and to be accountable for harm we have committed and to interrogate our well-

intentioned politics (Love, 2019, p. 122). We must be ready to put “something on the line in the name of justice” (Love, 2019, p. 159).

It is important to note that the staff at my school, the primary and overarching location for this study, had explicitly named a school-wide goal to pursue abolitionist teaching and intersectional racial justice before this study began. Our teacher-led Racial Equity Committee facilitates biweekly, text-based discussions about Love’s (2019) and Muhammad’s (2020) foundational work. All core content teachers in our school directly engage, on a biweekly basis, with Zaretta Hammond’s (2015) *Dimensions of Equity* and framework for culturally responsive pedagogy, which as Ladson-Billings famously stated is integral in effective teaching of students with intersectional identities. Our instructional priority of ensuring all students engage in critical, intellectual discourse in all classes is grounded in Hammond’s (2015) connections among oral traditions, dialogic talk, cognitive rigor, and cultural responsiveness. Finally, the teams of Humanities teachers in whose virtual classrooms and lessons participants will trace Whiteness had named Muhammad’s (2020) *Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL)* model as a foundational framework for unit planning.

The curriculum crafted and implemented as this research study method aligned with our school-wide instructional priorities and leveraged the HRL model as well - in pursuit of abolitionist teaching, centering students’ stories, and critical intersectionality. Numerous studies have leveraged curriculum theory to approach the design of the research study as curriculum design. Participatory models of research, or research as curriculum, has the “potential to aid instruction in research methods, illustrate the value of civic engagement, and reinforce a social justice orientation” by combining the

collection of data with cycles of learning in the precise way curricula are structured to do (Martinez, Perea, Ursillo, Pirie, Ndulue, Oliveira, & Gute, 2012, p. 491). Much like qualitative research designs, including comparative case study, arts- and narrative-based curriculum can have a transformative effect (Rolling, 2010, p. 111). In curriculum that incorporates the arts, as in arts-based research, the creative elements generate, organize, and reorganize the resulting “data” - in this case, students’ narratives and thinking - resulting in a proliferation of local expressions more aligned with an intersectional approach than those attempting to generalize or narrow participants into a unifying “correct” answer (Rolling, 2010, p. 106). Ritchhart (2011) offers a clear through line between the data collection of research studies and planning lessons and curriculum in the importance of educators facilitating activities (“routines”) that engage students in different types of thinking. These routines are concerned less with *what* students are doing and more with *how* they are thinking - and how that thinking can be surfaced. In this way, this comparative case study using arts-based elements to trace their own perceptions of Whiteness in, into, and out of literacy instruction aligns with a model for planning curriculum around essential questions and enabling participants to make their thinking visible (Ritchhart, 2011).

It was not by coincidence that I decided to use Muhammad’s (2020) HRL model as a framework for this curriculum. The HRL model, drawing from the legacies of Black literary societies starting in the early 1800s, at core concerns itself with criticality and types of thinking over rote knowledge or completion of activities. The HRL model’s emphasis on historical context supports this curriculum’s transversal analysis of Whiteness - and students’ perceptions of Whiteness - across unbounded time(s) and

space(s), leading into literacy instruction (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). As the persistent myths and lies anchoring America to Whiteness and White supremacy could be attributed to misunderstandings (willful or not) of the historical underpinnings of systems of oppression, history is an essential battleground on which the war for transformative justice and abolition of oppressive systems are fought (Glaude, 2020). The very identity categories used to justify oppression have been produced and are reproduced in every moment and context, and their centrality to histories of oppression warrants an ever-deeper dive into their origins and evolution; after all, as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) wrote, “race is the child of racism, not the father” (p. 7).

Whiteness can live anywhere, including in classrooms with no White people or teachers, though its flow of power operates differently with and through differently positioned people. Whiteness has continuously shifted precisely to retain hegemonic power. As an integral part of this curriculum, not only participants trace Whiteness; the facilitating educator is required to interrogate our own historical and evolving relationships to Whiteness through critical autobiography, as well. Through tracing and naming perceptions of Whiteness, and through generating questions and narratives that turn into possibilities and visions we can deny the invisibility that has enabled it to thrive.

As Rankine (2020) declares, the past is not dead and is always with and within us. Love (2019) concludes her pivotal work on abolitionist teaching by underscoring the importance of valuing theoretical models that help us understand and explain how injustice is produced and replicated. In the text, she offers a model for praxis that integrates personal narrative, theory, and historical analysis along what might be called a transversal axis. History is boundlessly relevant in who we are, as educators and as

people, and therefore on who and what we enact in our classrooms. Hence the necessity of the transversal analysis as framed by Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) comparative case study model.

Curriculum-as-Method and Result-as-Narrative

Rankine's analysis of Whiteness offers narratives for reexamination or re-storying and generates questions (prior to, through, and after the encounters she narrates) that guide the exploration - and that orient the project towards vision-building and freedom dreaming through imagination and a creative "what if." These are some examples of critical questions that undergird Rankine's (2020) analysis through the text, questions that anyone could answer but in some cases are contextually pointed in specific directions:

- "What if you are responsible to saving more than to changing? / What if you're the destruction coursing beneath / your language of savior?" (p.9)
- "What if what I want from you is new, newly made / a new sentence in response to all my questions...?" (p. 11)
- "If the structure that structures the scenario is itself racist, are the questions trick questions?" (p.65)
- "If white people don't see their whiteness, how can they speak to it?" (p. 67)
- "Does diversity not include any training to see ourselves or is it simply about addressing black grievance?" (p. 67)
- "What do you think? More importantly, what do you think when you are not thinking?" (p. 97)

- “How many narratives are there for black people in the white imaginary?” (p.319)
- “What would white people have to graft onto their fantasies so they can treat as real the possibility of true change?” (p. 329)
- “How do ‘all of us’ believe again in our inalienable rights?... But who is this ‘we’? Is it even possible to form a ‘we’?” (p. 331)

If I-as-reader, and most specifically I-as-White-reader, were to respond to these questions in the form of anecdotes or collage, what would result would be narrative-based reflections on my understanding and experience of my own Whiteness, a close reading of what Whiteness does and has done to me (and how I “do” Whiteness), and also tracing Whiteness through history, time, and space (the transversal axis and analysis necessarily incorporated). I have, in fact, already engaged with a number of Rankine’s questions by doing just this through my autoethnography – the elements of which in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 I created prior to conducting the study.

In this way, the structure of Just Us vaguely resembles a curriculum that centers essential questions for participants to engage - with the reader as participant, and any additional narratives created in the process of exploring the text-as-curriculum cyclically creating new possible stories to consider. Rankine could utilize my personal narrative anecdotes in this study as data for further critical analysis. (It is not surprising that Rankine teaches a course on the analysis of Whiteness at Yale.)

Similarly, this comparative case study (with cases being queer, TGE, or cisgender female middle school Students of Color) was structured around essential, guiding questions (mostly developed prior to the study but adjusted or augmented through the

process) that generated narratives through various art forms as results that warranted continuous reexamination over time (similar to my re-storying of my own personal narratives here). In addition to some of Rankine's questions, I utilized some questions from Kelley (2002) in the curriculum-as-method:

- “What are today's young activists dreaming about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?” (p. 9).
- “How can social movements actually reshape the desires and dreams of the participants?” (p. 10)

As Kelley (2002) established, freedom dreaming relies upon the generation of questions, possibilities, and new narratives - narratives that drive forward the process-oriented abolition movement (envisioning a society that has never before existed in the United States and reimagining what society must be), necessitating continuous reevaluation and reinterpretation in the process and essential as both method and result in this study. The many studies that have arranged for results (of data analysis) to take the form of narratives and other forms of artistic creation also support the decision for this curriculum-as-method to produce narratives-as-results (Sweet, 2019; Skinner, 2011; McCaffrey & Edwards, 2015; Ball, 2020; Rolling, 2010).

How many narratives are there for Black people in my imaginary? What do I think when I am not thinking?

Parameters of the Study

The groundbreaking studies examined above, though foundational for the proposed study, have overwhelmingly utilized unitary approaches to identity (Meyer,

Tilland-Stafford, & Airton, 2016; Blackburn, Clark, & Martino, 2016; Mittelman, 2018). Most research focused on LGBTQ+ students analyze non-academic aspects of school (like Gay Straight Alliances) and have predominantly or exclusively cited White students' experiences and voices, and most LGBTQ+ research concerns itself only with the impact of heteronormativity, not race (Meyer et al., 2016; Lewis & Sembiente, 2019). Similarly, in many studies focused on Students of Color, LGBTQ+ students and their unique positionings and literacy experiences are ignored or omitted.

This study took an intersectional approach, providing the space for students to express their full stories and freedom dream with their entire selves rather than engaging only unitary aspects of their identities. This lens created room to explore the impact of race, and specifically perceptions of Whiteness, on queer, TGE, or cisgender female Students of Color, tracing these experiences and perceptions across space and time.

In both academia and activism, intersectional approaches can ensure that no singular person's experience is elided with another's and that no member of a community is forced to make the futile effort to leave any part of themselves at the door. This study offers a model for other studies and future research, of a possible design that refuses to reduce students or direct them to choose among integral pieces of themselves. Rejecting the faulty assumption that (for example) sexuality and gender identities become relevant only in the context of enterprises focused on sexuality or gender, this study was grounded in the intersectional belief that all aspects of students' identities comprise a significant aspect of who they are in full, at all times, and in all contexts. Through this lens, embodying an LGBTQ+ identity does not only inform how one sees and experiences gender and sexuality; it informs how one sees and experiences anything (and everything);

and per Hammond's (2015) emphasis on knowing students as individuals, this will entail knowing and seeing them fully without attempting to separate the wholeness of their intersecting identities.

Our intersectional identities inform how we are seen as individuals and what we experience, and intersectionality is often employed to deconstruct interlocking systems of oppression to identify differentiated harm. As Lorde emphasizes, our intersectional identities cannot be extricated from one another. I (as researcher and as Assistant Principal) am simultaneously, and always, White, queer, and transgender – and I will bring all of my intersectional identities to the table with me at all times without the option of speaking to just one. The extension of researcher reflexivity to explicit, ongoing autoethnography can contribute to the increasing field of work reimagining what researcher-participant dynamics look and feel like.

This study also took an important, asset-based approach to intersectional identities. Intersectionality has often (and importantly) been employed as a tool to exclusively identify the oppressive ways in which dominant society perceives and therefore treats and victimizes intersectionally-marginalized students. However, intersectional identities also inform how students perceive and make meaning of the world, with every inextricable facet of students' identities co-constructing their lens and their very ways of seeing and knowing. This study shifted from a focus on the more responsive understanding of intersectionality (how students are seen and treated on the basis of their intersecting identities) to a more constructivist one (how intersecting identities encourage students to see and make meaning of the world). This framing has the power to also illuminate the tremendous assets of intersectionally-marginalized

students, and raises the questions: How does a student's positioning at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality support a unique and powerfully transformative way of seeing? How do the ways of seeing of queer, TGE, and cisgender female Youth of Color offer insight into the – particularly Black and Indigenous - legacy of justice-oriented, revolutionary and radical ways of seeing and envisioning futures that do not yet exist, such as freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2003)?

This study accepted students' perceptions of identity at face value and across various constructed interpretations (or readings) of these identities. Much research on Students of Color and literacy engagement, like Clark's 2017 study, focus on pre-established definitions of race rather than on students' conceptions of race. Whiteness is simultaneously a personal racial identity, experience, and bias; contextually determined patterns of behavior, communication, and customs (interpersonal); and a system of dominance and supremacy that pervades all contexts (systemic). As Glenn Singleton (2015) describes it in his book Courageous Conversations About Race, markers of Whiteness could be broken down into the categories of color (physical traits), culture (heritage, community, and behaviors), and consciousness (mindset, attitudes, and beliefs). Whiteness, as has been explored throughout this chapter, is more complex than just an individual's racial identity, and it is connected to privileges, behaviors, cultures, and mindsets (Singleton, 2015). This means that, while the impact of White individuals (especially teachers) on participants was an important facet of this study, the study also had to account for understandings and perceptions of Whiteness that live and exist even in classrooms or schools where there are no White-identified people.

Researchers have conducted many studies on the impact of Whiteness on teacher bias, teachers' perceptions of students, and teachers' language and behaviors – but few have engaged in identifying exactly where and when students see or feel Whiteness when it comes to literacy instruction, the connections between these perceptions and research bases around race, or the impact of this on students' reading motivation or engagement. No studies have explored middle school students' perceptions of Whiteness in literacy instruction while accounting for students' full, intersectional identities and positioning; and similarly, no studies have explored the impact of these intersectional perceptions of Whiteness on students' engagement with literacy instruction. In his work on stereotype threat, Claude Steele (2010) uncovered that what Students of Color perceive about race has a significant impact on their motivation, confidence, and academic success – regardless of how teachers or other people perceived the same experience. Even of the studies that approach participant populations intersectionally, most of which center college students, the emphasis tends to be on differentiated harm done to participants along intersectional lines based on how the world-at-large or their school community perceives and treats these students (Poynter & Washington, 2005; Gonzalez, 2019). This indicated a need for research that addresses the power of students' perceptions on a daily basis and examines how intersectional positioning impacts how and what we see and perceive. Advocating for academic liberation for intersectional student populations and pursuing abolitionist teaching demands that educators listen to and center the experiences, intersecting identities, and visions of queer, TGE, and cisgender female Students of Color.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Research Questions

My primary research questions for this study were:

- When and how do queer, TGE, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx middle school students perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction in their Humanities classrooms? How do these perceptions make them feel?
- How do their intersectional identities influence how, where, and when they perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction?
- What do the visions of this population for liberating literacy instruction look like?

My secondary research questions for the study, related to participants' educational contexts more specifically, were:

- How can educators create a space conducive to students' development of their own intersectional identities, examination of Whiteness in literacy instruction, and freedom dreaming about liberatory literacy instruction?
- What deliberate steps can educators make to create this space in their development of curriculum?

An additional, secondary question that evolved over the course of the study was:

What role does the naming and transversal tracing of perceptions of Whiteness play in imagining liberatory literacy instruction?

The research design for the study to explore these research questions consisted of the development of a curriculum grounded in research (especially centering narrative inquiry, intersectionality, culturally relevant pedagogy, and abolitionism as framed in the

previous chapters) that leveraged the importance of researcher reflexivity and autoethnography and that could be replicated by other educators. The curriculum-as-method (contained in full in Appendix B and explored throughout this chapter), which reflects Manning's (2018) "research-creation" as will be explained in this chapter, offered a process that proactively carved out a space where students of all intersectional identities could build visions and generate influential questions leading educators towards the development of liberatory and abolitionist literacy instruction. The curriculum structured a mini-unit composed of four weeks, with each week organized around an essential question and a primary activity - arts-based expressions, photo elicitations, or classroom observations - that supported students in generating narratives in group interviews. The narratives generated by participants were coded using In Vivo and Narrative coding and then re-storied as narratives that were interwoven to trace Whiteness across contexts per the framework of comparative case study (Saldana, 2016; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). This chapter lays out these methods and analytical approaches in more detail.

In my analysis of contexts, additional sub-questions emerged to gauge the permeability or rigidity of the study's contexts and probe the ways in which the object and primary phenomenon of the study (Whiteness) seeped in from outside the classroom or extended beyond it. These questions included:

- When and how did participants read Whiteness in me-as-researcher, in me-as-Assistant Principal, in the school, in the city, in the country, and in the world?
- How do queer, TGE, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx students perceive their dynamic with a White, queer, trans administrator and researcher?
- How do their intersectional identities inform how they read this dynamic?

As a White, queer, and transgender researcher, reflexivity was crucial in mediating bias; my positioning as Assistant Principal with significant influence over pedagogy, instruction, and adult learning in the school building required an element of autoethnography. This consisted not only of my own reflections throughout the process and transparency about each decision, but of participants' reflections on their dynamics with me as researcher and as Assistant Principal. Participants also traced Whiteness into and out of the literacy instruction in their Humanities classrooms.

All of these research questions assumed the existence of intersectional identities, based on the well-established research incorporated in the previous chapter. All terms in the study itself, aside from those already defined in this paper, will be defined by students. Students' self-definitions will be accepted at face value, without imposing upon them or the study a pre-established definition or my personal paradigm as researcher and Assistant Principal.

I continue my personal narrative in this chapter, inserting these vignettes as autoethnography, reflexivity, and artifacts that were crafted prior to the start of the study. There are not clear distinctions between who I am outside of this study and who I am as a researcher; there is no boundary between inside and out. No bounds exist separating the activities of my research life and the texts I consume on a daily basis in my personal life. Bettina Love (2019) declares that abolitionist teaching is not what one does in the classroom; it is a way of being and of living - which is to say, the place of the classroom is always under (re)construction, and I must recognize how I make that space and what I bring into it. The classroom is unbounded and unboundable, just as this curriculum-as-method.

The goal is not to comprehensively capture myself and my lived experience in these vignettes, but to aid the reader's assessment and understanding of the narratives generated through the study. The more the reader knows me, the better they understand my lenses and my biases – and the better I know them myself.

Methods

Comparative Case Study

I fully expected that the study would exceed the bounds of my pre-established research questions in ways I could not expect or anticipate. There were undoubtedly elements of the exploration of Whiteness that defied research and overflow beyond the scope of these questions, particularly when conducting the analysis demanded by the comparative case study (CCS) approach that served as my model.

In qualitative research, the researcher is “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” – another reason for embedded, critical self-analysis throughout the study (Merriam, 2001, p. 7). Case study design is “employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved,” necessitating an interest in process, context, and discovery; the “questions asked and their relationship to the end product” make the case study approach unique (Merriam, 2001, p. 19-31). These characteristics also render the general umbrella of case study an appropriate choice for this study as it seeks to generate narrative to describe specific experiences rather than aim for reliability or generalizability.

Comparative case study differs from traditional case study, even the most constructivist models such as the one championed by Merriam (2001), in numerous ways. Merriam (2001) diverges from foundational case study researchers such as Stake and Yin, calling for researcher reflexivity, naming power dynamics between researcher and participants, emphasizing process over product, and asserting that there is no objective reality (but multiple interpretations of it). However, even she espouses a belief in clear bounding of a study and case, concluding that “the single most defining characteristic of

case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case. Smith's (1978) notion of the case as a bounded system comes closest to my understanding" (Merriam, 2001, p. 27). Even Merriam (2001) finds herself insisting that a case must be a contained unit that the researcher can "fence in" (p. 27).

Comparative case study challenges the notion of bounded case study. According to Bartlett and Vavrus (2017), individual and cultural practices (including communication) are "never isolated" but always develop in relationship with broader environments influenced by politics, economics, social strata, and more (p. 1). All practices are embedded in numerous, intersecting dimensions of context and in a broader process of social production of meaning - which inherently involves hegemonic power dynamics at play (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 3).

CCS identifies three critical axes of the study - vertical, horizontal, and transversal - all three of which inevitably overlap: The horizontal comparison (across locations), the vertical attention to comparison across scales, and the transversal comparison that situates the focus process in historical contexts (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 3). The specific axes of comparison for this study are detailed later in this chapter.

In the CCS approach, no variable, phenomenon, participant, or context is presumed to be fixed or consistently bounded. All of these are assumed to be informed and impacted by contexts "well beyond the... current moment," which means that even the prospect of bounding them, as is traditionally and most often called for by case study practitioners, is "an illusion" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 13). CCS challenges notions of places, people, power, context, or variables as boundable and seeks to analyze processes - for example, how participants make sense of a phenomenon over time, across multiple

scales, and in relationship to systems of power (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 19). By resisting boundedness and engaging in a continuous (even endless) analysis of contexts, CCS recognizes that a researcher can never fully capture contexts because the contexts are never fully capturable.

On my first day of my first year of teaching in 2006, I introduced myself as Ms. K. A student inquired “Ms. K... or Mr. Gay?” I replied that either would suffice, as, yes, I was queer. [A colleague recently made a statement that we agreed is an important mindset for educators in pursuit of restorative justice models: “I cannot be a victim of my students.” A student, as any human being, could hurt feelings or cause physical harm. But this is different from victimization. When teachers invoke our power, the force of the State takes action, responding swiftly and with disproportionate - though it will never be publicly named or considered such - violence in defense of me. This is much like calling the police, as a White person. When are schools not pipelines to prison, but prisons themselves?]

Later that year, a student who was not in any of my classes came to my classroom at the end of the school day. She sat down at a desk and explained, with tears in her eyes, that she went to the dean because another student was making fun of her for being bisexual. The dean had responded “You don’t even know what bisexual means.” The student didn’t want me to do anything, she just wanted to talk to me because she’d heard that I was gay.

On my first day of my third year of teaching, and my first day as Mr. K, I had remembered to bring the tie I had decided to wear - as a visual reminder to help colleagues use my appropriate, new pronouns - but had forgotten to watch a YouTube video about how to tie it. Not knowing what else to do, I turned to the White, cis, straight male teacher (one of many at that school) in line behind me, waiting for the communal photocopier, and I anxiously asked if he would help me. He seemed surprised I asked but quickly and kindly made the knot around his own neck and loosened it so I could put it over my head. I wonder now if he and others had assumed for the previous two years that I was aloof because I’d never even tried to connect with them; though I do not wonder why I had been too nervous to do so.

During my third year of teaching, 15-year-old gender expansive student Lawrence King was shot and killed in California by a classmate - who was then tried for a hate crime and as an adult, a decision fueled by grief and the delusion that revenge and extended incarceration might prompt solutions or healing. I shared an article about King’s murder with the rest of the staff at my school with a note detailing my plan to read and discuss it with my classes. A fellow queer

teacher thanked me for sharing it; three other teachers and an administrator told me that my 13-year-old students were “too young to learn about this.”

On the second to last day of my fourth year of teaching, one of my students asked if I had a moment and pulled a chair up next to my desk. “Mr. K, I heard you were, like, gay or something?” I followed with my final trans disclosure at that middle school, which the student followed with his own: “I’m bi-curious. I know I like girls, but I’m sometimes attracted to boys.” He had told his group of friends in October and said they were cool with him, but his dad wouldn’t be okay with it if he found out.

On our last day of school during my fourth and final year of teaching there, I left a short memo in everyone’s mailbox, a letter acknowledging that many trans people feel the need to leave their jobs or homes in order to transition and thanking everyone there for everything they had done - including helping me tie my tie - so I could stay.

In resisting essentializing or generalizing approaches to participants, variables, and contexts, and by insisting on attention to interconnectedness, CCS inherently aligns with intersectionality (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 11). CCS approaches culture as ever-changing and centered on the social production of meaning, recognizing that “while groups may ‘claim to own culture’ for strategic reasons, ‘not everyone inside the group necessarily shares the same beliefs and norms’” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 32). This appreciation of culture and individuals as simultaneously collective and local harkens back to intersectionality’s refusal of single-axis analysis that elides distinctions among the individuals within a collective.

As previously established, intersectionality was the backbone of the study for numerous reasons. Intersectionality combated the violent erasure prevalent in single- or multiple-axis research analyses and social movements and was central to abolitionism, culturally relevant pedagogy, and restorative justice approaches. Abolitionism via intersectionality deliberately resists hegemonic power dynamics by identifying as leaders

those most harmed by systems of oppression, recognizing the ability of these unique, intersectionally-positioned individuals to harness a creative power to envision a world without those systems of oppression - a world that does not yet exist. By extension, intersectionality is necessary in the restorative justice practices demanded by abolitionism, in order to honor every individual's story and prize every single member of our communities (even when they perpetuate harm, and in order to support true healing). Culturally relevant pedagogy necessitates intersectional approaches to all students, in order to develop a deep relationship with and understanding of them through a strengths-based lens in order to tailor instructional methods to meet their needs. Intersectionality was, therefore, essential in creating a space for participants to explore and reflect upon their own intersectional identities, when and how they perceive Whiteness, how their identities inform their ways of seeing, and their visions of what liberatory literacy instruction could look and feel like.

I put intersectionality into practice in my research methods by designing the research study using a learner-centered curriculum approach. This method, like a curriculum, was the generalizable or replicable aspect of the study; the result of the study was to generate (and offer for wider consideration) stories and questions from unique, local students. The modality of narrative inquiry enabled me to embrace specificity and refuse generalization, and to provide results that mirrored the intersectional approach taken through the study. Comparative case study also accommodated - or even required - researcher transparency and self-interrogation, both critical elements of this study's autoethnographic element.

As I elaborate later in this section, in my use of comparative case study in this study, with Whiteness as the central phenomenon, each participant constituted a general case - with the tracking of each individual participant's words and art-based creations even through group interviews - as will be discussed in further detail shortly. However, instead of approach the context as purely spatial (the virtual or physical Humanities classroom) or temporal (during the immediate Humanities lesson), the comparative case study approach demanded room to account for (transversally) the unknown depths of historical and sociopolitical context that influenced how and when the participants perceived Whiteness, the ways in which participants' perceptions of Whiteness in Humanities lessons stemmed from perceptions of Whiteness outside the classroom and through their own histories and lives, and their continuously-shifting conceptions of their own intersectional identities and of Whiteness.

Participants

The theoretical and conceptual framework for this study aligned with and supported comparative case study, which demanded that I explicitly and coherently map what happened during the study and how my research questions adjusted over time. This approach to case study, in which I assumed that the phenomenon, contexts, and cases of the study would inevitably exceed any attempts to bound them, demanded an examination of the sociopolitical context of the phenomenon - therefore, an analysis of the local and regional context of Whiteness in literacy instruction at my middle school.

During my first year as Mr. K, we returned from the holiday vacation in January 2009. Before the school day started, I encountered a shy student on his own in the hallway, waiting for the bell. He just smiled when I asked about his vacation, so I prompted "Did anything interesting or exciting happen?" He paused, brow

furrowed in thought for a moment. Then his face lit up, and he stated, earnestly and definitively: "My voice got deeper!" I validated his enthusiasm, keeping to myself that mine had gotten deeper, too.

In the spring of 2009, during a brief read aloud from a class novel, a student whom I happened to know had two mothers raised his hand. "Mr. K, I heard a rumor that you're... that you're gay." The class went silent for a moment, and then another student protested, saying: "Shut up!" I interjected, explaining that he may have heard that I used to be Ms. K. I confirmed this and identified myself as transgender. Immediately, several students shot their hands into the air, waving eagerly. "That's so cool!" the first said. The next, instead of saying anything, stepped up behind me and awkwardly wrapped her arms around me. The following three students simply wanted to confirm that they had stumbled upon the Brooklyn Pride parade the prior weekend. The sixth student asked "Did you have to go to that Brooklyn Pride parade?" to which I responded "Well, I don't have to go; it isn't like I get my membership revoked if I don't attend." Some students laughed; some said "Ohhh."

In 2010, one of my students wore sweater vests regularly and twirled pink highlighters in his hand; his sheer loveability and positivity seemed to spare him the too-common experiences of many sixth-grade boys with skinny limbs, an all-girls friends' group, and an eager inquisitiveness. One day, he approached me during independent reading to exclaim: "Mr. K! This book said gender and sex are the same, but I thought they were different. On 'The Real World: Brooklyn' there's this woman who used to be a boy, I learned it from her. That's a real thing, right?" I responded affirmatively, that there were transgender people, and that I knew in part because I was one. He cocked his head to literally view me from a different angle. "So, when you were in middle school, you were a girl?" I nodded. He raised his eyebrows. Then, suddenly, he bolted out the door with a "gotta go, bye, thanks Mr. K!" As his class filed in the next morning, he casually bounced over, placed a Post-It on my desk, smiled, and took his seat. After the lesson, I read the note, which contained three questions: "How did you know you were a boy? Was it hard to change? Do you feel happier now that you are yourself?"

The Title I public middle school where I am Assistant Principal, located in Harlem, was founded seven years ago by our current, White, cisgender, male principal through a program headed by then-mayor Michael Bloomberg. In the first year of the school's existence, its founding teachers decided they needed to try a different, non-traditional approach to discipline, conflict resolution, and harm reparation. They adopted

a model from a research-based program, in whose model all students are assumed to want to succeed and any barriers to their success are assumed to be results of systemic oppression or a skills-based gap (or both) rather than from malicious intention. The beliefs behind the model include that punishment-based consequences (such as detention or suspension) serve only to temporarily remove and isolate students from their communities - which not only does not teach a student any skills to support them in behaving differently but often exacerbates the problem by perpetuating stigma and alienation. In short, punishment is an ineffective teacher of skills and an inconsistent (at best) motivator. In lieu of punishment-based consequences, the model structures restorative and teaching-based approaches to addressing students' behaviors - and the principles can be applied to relationships among adults, as well. In these ways, this approach is firmly grounded in restorative justice models as well as in abolitionist movements to eradicate oppressive systems like prison and criminal justice systems that disincentivize truth-telling, accountability, and learning and pursue more liberating and healing alternatives (Klein, 2020; Kumanyika, 2020).

The urgency of racial justice and the fight for educational equity in a city whose schools remain among the most segregated in the country grounded the school from the start, though the approaches, systems, and ongoing learning to support this goal have evolved. As a visiting instructional coach at the school for three years prior to joining full-time as Assistant Principal, at the time of the study I had spent five years in collaborating with the Principal, the Instructional Coach, and staff to develop our current instructional priorities (reflected by our Planning Checklist included in Appendix A) which prioritize culturally responsive pedagogy. All of our teacher teams utilize this

Planning Checklist of priorities to guide their daily team planning time. As Assistant Principal, starting two years prior to this study, the principal and I began to create structures to distribute leadership across the school in pursuit of our broader goals of intersectional racial justice and pursuing abolitionist teaching - goals that were made explicit by our Racial Equity Committee with the entire staff in the spring of 2020. Through a committee structure, all teachers became involved in collaboratively planning and facilitating staff-wide learning, and our Racial Equity Committee led our staff in reading Bettina Love's We Want to Do More Than Survive and collaboratively developing our own context-based definition of abolitionist teaching. The year this study took place, we had incorporated biweekly opportunities for our core content teams to take turns critiquing each other's' end-of-unit tasks, which included as lenses Zaretta Hammond's (2015) Dimensions of Equity and the Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) model for culturally responsive unit planning as described by Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020). Two years ago, our entire staff engaged in book clubs focused on racial equity in schools and classrooms, reading either Robin DiAngelo's White Fragility, Lisa Delpit's Multiplication is for White People, Derald Wing Sue's Race Talk, or Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's Racism without Racists. Excerpts from these texts were incorporated into staff-wide PD. As a school, over the two years leading up to this study we had taken explicit strides towards naming and recognizing Whiteness in ourselves and as a staff, and starting the initial process of freedom dreaming together - what would our school look like if we became an abolitionist school? This study aimed to inform this ongoing, never-complete work by centering the voices most important to this freedom dreaming.

At the time of this study, both of us who were school administrators were White, and about 31 out of 39 (approximately 79 percent) of the members of our full-time staff were People of Color. There were at least four openly LGBTQ-identified staff members. About 95 percent of students identified as Students of Color, with about 93 percent identifying as Latinx and/or Black; and almost all of our students qualified for government-subsidized, free breakfast and lunch.

The participants for the study were three students at my middle school. I have decided not to share their grade levels to enhance anonymity. At least one of the participants has at some point been among 15 to 25 students each year who constitute our school's Pride Club, which was started three years ago. Last year, students (including this study's participants) learned about intersectionality and explored LGBTQ+ identities and issues through an intersectional and critical lens, which included an examination of the whitewashing of LGBTQ+ histories such as the 1969 Stonewall uprising. Last year, the Pride Club conducted several actions, culminating in their creation of a zine commemorating the National Day of Silence on April 24, 2020. Several participants in this study contributed pieces in that zine. Here is one example, courtesy of Pride Club (2020):

Closet Door

When you're young you might close the closet door
You might lock yourself in, so no one can see you
Sometimes you might let someone special peek inside
Eventually, you might try to open the door

The doorknob might not budge at first, but once the door is open

You are home.

I had developed a relationship with each of the participants prior to this study, in numerous ways: As the Assistant Principal of the school for the past three years who frequently visits classrooms, conducts lunch duty, and is available before, during, and after school in the hallways or Main Office; as the facilitator of a weekly section of the Pride Club book club two years ago, during which we read Anger is a Gift by Mark Oshiro; and as a visitor to a Pride Club meeting last year, during which I shared a bit about my experiences as a queer and trans person and fielded questions from students. Additionally, I have been the unofficial point person for teachers who have questions about students who come out to them as LGBTQ+ or TGE, often leading me to check in directly with those students myself. However, entering the study even my relationship with participants was unboundable due to the limitations of my own knowledge about the ways in which students engaged with me.

In January 2020, an eighth-grade student journalist interviewed me for our school newspaper. Alongside my portrait for our school website and yearbook, the story included some of the challenges I experienced transitioning and some of my social justice activism starting in college. In the spring of 2020, the first edition of our school newspaper was printed in hard copy - but due to the COVID quarantine, students did not have access to it until September.

In October 2020, a student who would later become a participant in this study - and who had previously identified herself to me as bisexual - opened a conversation with me: "I showed my grandma your story. The one about you. She said you were attractive. I was like 'Ew, Grandma!' But she said 'You wanted to know my honest opinion!' And then I showed my mom the story. She said she liked it, too."

Did the story about me provide a litmus test for the student, to help her gauge her family's response and feelings about my identities? Did her grandmother and mother suspect that, as well? I did not know many details about the student's prior conversations with her family.

Later that day, I mentioned this conversation to an LGBTQ+ colleague, who immediately said: "She was checking to see if it's safe!" We recounted some of the fears and anxieties of our young, queer days, before we had the vocabulary and context to begin making sense of our own queer and trans bodies, before we began the (ongoing, forever) processes of coming out and disclosure. The immediacy of this colleague's similar response to my own validated the beautiful rush of belonging; we see things that straight, cis people do not see because they have never had to. Sitting in my temporary office, I realized I had so infrequently worked with other queer or TGE colleagues that I had resigned myself to the absence of that belonging.

What other people are missing a feeling like this? How might an absence like this impact students, teachers, community, friends, family, and the strangers with whom I interact on a daily basis?

Curriculum-as-Method

As explained above, explorations of phenomena, and particularly Whiteness as a phenomenon, are so deeply embedded in contexts - including but not limited to time, space, and participants - that positivist, generalizable results are unattainable. A comparative case study approach demands the comparison of cases across: locations, including various homes, neighborhoods, classrooms, and places of origin (horizontal axis); scales, including emotions and the impact of perceptions of Whiteness on students' lives, histories, and literary experiences (vertical axis); and historical and sociopolitical contexts (transversal axis) (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 7). Additionally, the theoretical framework of intersectionality demands attending to individuals' unique positioning within a broader constellation of hegemonic systems within and outside of classrooms;

generalizability is not only unattainable, in fact through a lens of intersectionality the pursuit of generalizability always runs the risk of perpetuating erasure.

Manning's (2018) model of research-creation applies to this study. Research-creation aligns to "the ways in which study itself is a practice" and "a mode of inquiry that asks what (other) forms learning can take," which refuses to privilege traditional modes of knowing and recognizing "thinking as a creative practice in its own right" (p. 9). Research-creation deliberately centers neurodiverse, Black, Indigenous, and queer forms of knowing that resist the standards of knowledge and language often institutionally imposed - including through and in the forms of research (Manning, 2018, p. 10). Instead, according to research-creation, a study recognizes that intellectuality and value are already present in the stories participants are telling and in the way that they are telling them – and that these activities do not need to be "ennobled" by a researcher or by being fit into a pre-determined definition for a "study" (Manning, 2018, p. 11). It also refuses the traditional assumptions of participant-as-object or product-as-object and embraces process as product, thereby threatening institutional "power/knowledge" (Manning, 2018, p. 9). This study could be classified as research-creation in its approach to participants as co-creators and co-researchers, in its incorporation of arts-based, non-linear, and non-linguistic modalities, in its insistence on researcher autoethnography, in its valuation of participants' lives and stories at face value, and in its embrace of process as product and the product involves me-as-researcher embodying some of the work it advocates.

The most significant contribution of this study (this research-creation) is not a static object but a process within which everyone involved has "consent not to be a single

being” and to be “more-than” a singular moment or embodiment (Manning, 2018, p. 12). Research-creation was the only approach that would accommodate the understanding of individuals’ intersecting identities as an “‘I’ exalted” or “more-than” while exploring their perceptions of themselves and of Whiteness both locally and transversally.

The simultaneous processes engaged in through this particular study comprise its products. The first process is provided through my autoethnography – the active attempt to do the work (critical autobiography and self-examination) explored and advocated through the study. The second process involved being an active and reflective participant in participants’ stories, using a set of guiding questions and principles that could be transferable to other educators and contexts. Drawing from a long history of Participatory Action Research and other forms of research designs simultaneously structured for data collection and collective action and learning (Hudson & Braithwaite, 2017), this research study was designed to include a tailored, pre-developed curriculum as a primary method. Not only does this method enable a researcher to gather meaningful information about students; the curriculum-as-method reframes the study itself to be just one step in an iterative process of data-based learning and data-informed decision-making that educators must engage in continuous cycles with the same students.

The research-creation here narrativized how I went about creating a space where participants’ specific stories (stories-as-products) could be told, explored, and leveraged by students to vision-build and freedom-dream. Therefore, rather than thinking of “instruments” in my design, I focused on the key elements to any curriculum unit plan (which always constitute a process): Essential questions, primary objectives, and facilitation decisions including prompts for myself. This curriculum-as-method, informed

by the research base provided in Chapters 1 and 2, features all the primary elements of curriculum - units organized around essential questions, specified objectives, and connection to state standards (see Appendices B through G) - and strategically aligns with Muhammad's (2020) Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework. The curriculum-as-method is included in Appendix B, designed around the essential questions and objectives that guide each stage of the process, which in turn led to insights responding to my overarching research questions. I built out detailed protocols for the arts-based activities and interviews at each stage, with my questions serving as the replicable elements of a curriculum whose goal is not to gain the same results from every participant or group of participants.

This curriculum-as-study is deliberately not a curriculum in the traditional understanding of that term. By aligning with Dr. Muhammad's (2020) Historically Responsive Literacy framework, this curriculum-as-study, while offering connections to some Common Core Standards (see Appendix C), challenges the exclusive dominance of these standards in traditional curriculum. Muhammad's (2020) framework establishes that abolitionist or culturally responsive curriculum planning considers the cultivation of skills as just one of five goals that are necessary and urgent in curriculum – including cultivating identity, intellectualism, criticality, and joy. This curriculum-as-study is structured around essential questions and learning and can be replicated in other contexts, as a traditional curriculum – but it was not crafted in line with traditional understandings of curriculum.

In teaching, a curriculum supports educators in continuously collecting data about students to inform our next lessons and units; this data is not considered a final or fixed

determination about any individual student but is understood to represent a specific point in an ongoing growth process. This study was appropriately structured as a curriculum because, similarly, it did not aim to produce static, fixed, or generalizable results but to surface narrative-data and questions to begin a following, iterative cycle of inquiry to gather further narrative data (in the classroom or through further research).

This curriculum-as-method (grounded in research-creation) is the vehicle for narrative inquiry and autoethnography, explicitly demanding researcher reflexivity and self-interrogation throughout. Over the course of my implementation of the curriculum in this study, portions of my narrative-results reflected on the effectiveness and structure of the curriculum itself, offering ideas and guiding questions for consideration to any educators who might wish to develop and implement their own modified version of it. The desire for potential transferability fueled the creation of this curriculum and the transparent process, throughout the narrative results, of what worked well and what challenges arose in my specific implementation of it.

Therefore, there were three main results of this study, all of which are structured around processes that will produce different results in different contexts. First, the results consisted of interwoven narratives based on participants' stories, interspersed with autoethnographic personal narratives from Me-as-researcher. The comparative aspect of the case study emerges through action - both participants' narratives being placed in dialogue with each other and the reader making meaning. Lastly, this curriculum-as-method offers a process-as-product for readers and educators.

The more transferable aspect of this study was a set of essential questions in the form of the curriculum (in full in Appendix B) - along with a continuous reflection on

this pilot implementation - that could be thoughtfully adapted, tailored, and revised by educators, using the guiding contexts and resources detailed here, for use in their specific context. The curriculum delineates structures for groups of students to interact with and react to a series of questions and prompts designed for the specific contexts of the study. If another educator were to aim to implement this curriculum in its entirety with a different group of students, which they would ideally do early in the year to then inform future instruction and planning, they could not simply implement this exact curriculum the same way I did. They would need to engage with a similar process that I have mapped out – beginning with the critical autobiography that I have included here in chapters 1, 2, and 3, which I crafted prior to beginning the study. This process informs the modifications to this curriculum that would be necessary to another educator, given their context, positioning, and students, to support their students in making their intersectional selves and thinking visible.

Inevitably, the “results” – the re-storied narratives, visions, and freedom dreams – produced would be, and should be, different from those here as those results are not the ultimate or sought-after “product.” The processes comprise the product, as are the generative questions developed through those processes that inspire new stories, possibilities, and wonderings in the pursuit of liberatory and abolitionist literacy instruction.

However, even if another educator could not replicate this curriculum in full in their classrooms, there are specific elements that I hope they would transfer or implement. All of these elements are process-dependent and rely heavily on the implementor’s self-reflexivity and self-examination through the intersectional, narrative,

and inquiry lenses proposed through this study. A prospective implementor might use these curriculum-as-method and autoethnographic processes to explore what it could look like for them to use Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) as a foundation for one of their units. They might engage in a personal, autoethnographic project themselves and then seek to share this process with colleagues and/or students. They might enhance the research-creation in their classrooms, embracing arts-based approaches, narrative, and inquiry that open doors for all students (including those who are not neurotypical) to share their stories - prior to or instead of traditional approaches based in students providing correct answers and making their thinking visible only in writing. They might consider the value of professional texts such as those engaged throughout this project in their school or district to deepen reflections about intersectional justice and race.

The process of implementing the curriculum changed as we proceeded. I had intended to utilize a Padlet activity to gauge changes in students' thinking at the start and then at the end of the study, to have a more concrete gauge of how the process impacted them. However, in the initial meeting I found myself too concerned with trying to ensure participants attended (and following up with them via Google chat) to remember to complete the initial Padlet. Instead, I incorporated an explicitly reflective thinking routine at the end of the study, inquiring: How have my ideas or understandings grown or changed over the course of this study? In future iterations of this curriculum, especially with larger numbers of students, it could be valuable to have the Padlet activity to provide concrete before-and-after data.

Curriculum Overview

The curriculum-as-method is included in full in Appendix B, with correlating New York State Next Generation Learning Standards in Appendix C, followed by protocols in Appendices D, E, F, and G.

It is a social and ethical imperative that educators (of all children) strive to be abolitionist teachers (Love, 2019). In this pursuit, it is critical for us to know and validate students in the fullness of their intersectional identities, to avoid erasing or pressuring students to submerge any part of themselves at any time, to support students in a critical analysis of power and intersectional oppressions, and to foster joy and the brilliance of marginalized communities that has historically been omitted from mainstream educational narratives (Crenshaw, 1989; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020). For this reason, among others, including the long-standing connection between storytelling and culturally responsive pedagogy, this curriculum-as-method unit hinges on personal narrative (Hammond, 2015). Working towards intersectional racial justice and the abolition of harmful institutions and forms of oppression (as abolitionist teachers aspire to do) requires a collective examination of the impact of hegemonic Whiteness inside and outside of the classroom space **and** the centering of imagination and deliberate creation of space to freedom dream (Kelley, 2003; Love, 2019; Rankine, 2020; Michael, 2015; Singleton, 2015). Students must be given the opportunity, with their full intersectional selves, to engage in this freedom dreaming - and their visions for liberatory pedagogy must drive all that we do.

This unit of study or similar processes that educators might attempt to implement should occur very early in a school year, as the narratives and questions generated through this process will fuel possibilities for the remainder of the year. Aligned with the

stated purpose above, the unit was designed using the Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework (Muhammad, 2020). HRL acknowledges the primacy of (hi)stories in the present-day fights for racial justice, liberation, and literacy; in the creation of this framework Muhammad (2020) centered the stories of Black literary societies tracing back to the early 1800s as inspiration for models of emancipatory literacy. This redoubles the curriculum's emphasis on narrative.

There are four primary learning goals of HRL, each of which are incorporated into the curriculum in Appendix B.

1. *Cultivating Identity*. Identity includes “notions of who we are, who others say we are... and whom we desire to be... Our identities (both cultural identities and others) are continually being (re)defined and revised while we reconsider who we are within our sociocultural and sociopolitical environment” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 67). This was incorporated into all four weeks of the curriculum, in the form of student reflections on and expressions of their intersectional identities.
2. *Cultivating Skills*. Skills are proficiencies, determined by educators, that are used to define achievement standards - e.g. Next Generation Learning Standards (Muhammad, 2020, p. 85). This was also incorporated into all four weeks of the curriculum, specifically skills relating to discussion, question-generation, and analysis of elements of narrative; these are reflected by the New York State Next Generation Learning Standards listed in Appendix C.
3. *Cultivating Intellect and Intellectualism*. Intellect is “the understanding, enhancement, and exercising of mental powers and capacities that allow one to better understand and critique the world” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 104).

Intellectualism was cultivated particularly in Weeks 2, 3, and 4 of this curriculum (research-creation), when students engaged in comparing, contrasting, and challenging each other's' perceptions of Whiteness in their everyday lives, in school, and in literacy instruction and in their responses to each other's' visions for liberatory literacy instruction. Throughout this curriculum, true to Muhammad's (2020) grounding of HRL in Black literary societies, students cultivated intellectualism in groups.

4. *Cultivating Criticality*. Criticality is "the capacity to read, write, and think in ways of understanding power, privilege, social justice, and oppression" (Muhammad, 2020, p. 120). This curriculum cultivated criticality particularly in Weeks 2, 3, and 4, when students critically examined the impact of Whiteness in their lives and instruction and imagined literacy instruction that is validating to their intersectional identities.

The unit also built upon numerous frameworks of culturally responsive pedagogy, including Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995), Geneva Gay's (2000), Sonia Nieto's (2003), and Zaretta Hammond's (2015).

First, it enabled the teacher-as-facilitator to adhere to the research-based instructional priorities captured in the Planning Checklist (see Appendix A) in implementing the curriculum - most importantly the Planning Checklist priorities calling for verbal dialogue as both a deliverable in and of itself and as essential in culturally responsive pedagogy. The Visible Thinking Routines offered by Ron Ritchhart (2011) can also be utilized as needed, as scaffolds to support students in making their creative expressions and narratives visible.

Second, the curriculum required the teacher-as-facilitator not only to participate along with students but also to engage in an autoethnography throughout the unit; numerous models of culturally responsive pedagogy emphasize the critical importance of educators continuously self-reflecting on our own identities, what we bring into the classroom, and how we impact the classroom. Lastly, students were learning with and through dialogue with each other. Whereas in other units there may be more explicit teacher modeling of skills (as can be important), this unit centered each others' authentic narratives as the grounding texts, positioning no individual as more "expert" than anyone else in the room and nothing more than students' narratives as needed for meaningful and critical learning processes - though the teacher maintained positional power that must be considered throughout and taken into account.

Throughout the unit, the primary objectives for students were producing narratives, generating and posing critical questions, and synthesizing ideas that emerge from the group. At the end of the unit, students engaged in metacognitive reflection around how their thinking (about liberatory lessons, their own identities, perceptions and experiences of Whiteness, question-generation, or more) changed over the course of these activities. The data collected and analyzed by the teacher-as-facilitator, received in the form of narratives, questions, and ideas, absolutely must drive the teacher's approach to the remainder of the school year in terms of planning, relationship-building, ongoing self-learning, mindsets, and more.

Procedures and Instruments

As explained in the curriculum overview above, and is illustrated in Appendix B, in addition to incorporating other elements of culturally responsive pedagogy, the

curriculum was developed around Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's (2020) Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework. The curriculum-as-method structured a mini-unit lasting four weeks, with each week organized around an essential question and a primary activity that supported students in generating narratives.

The initial plan was to further structure and support the group interviews by introducing Singleton's (2015) Courageous Conversations Compass and protocol – at least part of the protocol, as a starting-point (see Appendix D) – at the very start of Week 1. As described later, while I planned for us to utilize this each week, we did not use it after Week 1. Then, in the rest of Week 1, the original plan was for participants to create arts-based expressions of their choice to share their intersectional identities and the histories of these identities, and to narrate these arts-based projects and fielding questions in a group interview setting. As also described below, this did not happen in exactly the way I had expected, though we were able to engage in the planned storytelling.

The plan for Week 2 consisted of a photo elicitation project, in which participants were directed to find or digitally take photographs of (or representing) anything in our daily lives, inside or outside of school, that made them think of Whiteness. In our group discussion, participants narrated the connections between images and Whiteness in their daily lives and posed questions.

Week 3 included participants and researcher taking notes during three Humanities lessons to trace their perceptions of Whiteness throughout the lesson and what feelings those perceptions of Whiteness surfaced. In a group interview setting afterwards, participants narrated their perceptions and feelings of Whiteness in that lesson and fielded questions from their peers.

Lastly, during our session in Week 4, participants were told they could utilize artistic media of their choosing – including poetry, drawing, or design on their computers - to express their visions for what a validating and liberating literacy-based lesson would feel and look like. This is elaborated upon below. In a group discussion, participants shared their visions and reflected on the influence of their intersectional identities on those visions.

Week 1

The structure of Week 1 of the curriculum design followed the HRL model, focusing on the first two of Muhammad’s (2020) four key elements to abolitionist curriculum - cultivating identity and cultivating skills. As can be seen in more detail in the complete curriculum (Appendix B), this first stage of the curriculum as planned consisted of three main elements: Introduction to norms, arts-based creation, and narration.

Per my initial plan, the first part of the first week focused on structuring and supporting the group interviews by introducing Singleton’s (2015) *Courageous Conversations* Compass and protocol – at least part of the protocol, as a starting-point (see Appendix D). This protocol was developed deliberately to support conversations about race. The Compass offered a way to locate and name participants’ current state, in order to navigate the dialogue (Singleton, 2015, p. 29). The Four Agreements provided norms for the discussion (Singleton, 2015, p. 70). Finally, the First Condition (of six total, but the only one utilized for this study) encouraged participants to focus on the “personal, local, and immediate” – which guided everyone to speak for themselves and

articulate their personal experiences and perspectives rather than simply agree with others (Singleton, 2015, p. 87). The beginning of Week 1 involved getting participants acclimated to this Courageous Conversations protocol. We did not end up revisiting this protocol together explicitly in later weeks of the study - in large part because we were able to shift to in-person sessions, had a small group, and participants expressed a lack of enthusiasm that translated into me doing most of the talking during this portion - though I had originally planned that we would do use the protocol each week. In fact, only two participants showed up to the Zoom meeting for the first part of Week 1, which required me to conduct the initial part of Week 1 – which fortunately did not connect to any transcribed data – with the third participant one-on-one. The third participant admitted to me that they had simply forgotten in the crush of added responsibilities they have shouldered throughout this pandemic-riddled school year.

For the second part of Week 1, using a social identity wheel which I then translated into a T-chart as a first step, participants were directed to (between the first meeting of Week 1 and the second meeting of Week 1) develop an arts-based method of their choice to express their personal, intersectional identities and what they know about the histories of those identities. Then, third, in a group interview format (more details below), participants were going to narrate their arts-based creations one at a time, with structured opportunities for fellow participants and teacher-facilitators to generate questions and offer validations about their narratives, their identities, and their chosen media. Neither of these last two parts occurred in exactly the way they were planned, as I will describe shortly.

The emphasis on creative, narrative-based ways for participants to share in the curriculum plan stemmed from research connecting written or oral storytelling to culturally responsive practices, particularly for Students of Color (Hammond, 2015). As explained in Chapter 2, the element of autoethnography contained in this portion of the curriculum (in which the researcher-as-facilitator participated along with participants) connects directly to a culturally responsive pedagogical lens, as deepening our self-understanding and engaging in continuous reflection on our personal narratives are foundational aspects of culturally responsive, anti-racist, and abolitionist pedagogy.

As discussed in Chapter 2, arts-based methods can structure new and varied ways of thinking about a given topic, which enables participants to access narratives that they might not otherwise, and to share in ways they may not otherwise do. Arts-based methods also challenge traditional relationships between methods and results; in the case of this study, the arts-based methods lend themselves to the production of narratives, which lead (through the process of data analysis) to restoried narratives-as-results. Additionally, arts-based research, seen as a process rather than a bounded product or object, can open “previously unimagined or impossible means of knowing” (Sweet, 2019, p. 50). The process of creating art, when valued aside from art-as-product, can be a form of knowledge-generation; in this way, arts-based methods were an essential element in a study planned as “research-creation” (Manning, 2016; Manning, 2018).

In this study, the planned goal of the arts-based creations were valuable as a process, not as objects or products - they were utilized by the group of participants collectively to generate knowledge and by Me-as-researcher to generate questions and, eventually, more art (re-storied narrative) as product.

In Week 1 the original plan was for participants to create arts-based expressions of their choice to share their intersectional identities and the histories of these identities, and to narrate these arts-based projects and fielding questions in a group interview setting. For the start of the second part of Week 1, all three participants brought to the Zoom meeting the chart of identities that we had walked through together (and that I had modeled), and only one participant had completed a different form of arts-based expression. (See Appendix L.) The teacher-facilitator (in this case also researcher, myself) participated in this as well, as a part of the autoethnography incorporated into the curriculum. Most of my participation in this week was in my modeling of various aspects of my identity using the chart that participants then completed (see Appendix L), in posing probing questions to participants after they shared their stories, and in asking reflective questions at the end about how participants experienced the week.

As needed, I anticipated that a sensory analysis of the arts-based creations in both Week 1 and Week 4 could inform the questions generated by participants (as directed in the curriculum) and the follow-up and probing questions developed by the researcher (or teacher-facilitator, as described in the curriculum). Though only one participant made an arts-based creation during Week 1, all three used the chart to brainstorm their ideas in writing prior to sharing; and though no participants chose to do an arts-based creation during Week 4, they all chose to utilize a graphic organizer to brainstorm ideas in writing to inform their storytelling.

Fortunately, the arts-based creations were not absolutely necessary for the storytelling. And I had not planned to include participants' arts-based creations during Week 1 and Week 4 of the curriculum as part of the data analysis (only the verbal

narratives). I did plan, however, for them to serve as essential artifacts of the process of narrative development, and what students created (even just their charts) did lead to an in-the-moment visual and sensory analysis of what students had created that informed my follow-up questions for participants.

I believe the option of arts-based creation should remain during Week 1 for any future iterations of this curriculum, regardless of how participants do or do not utilize the option – and it would be maximized if an entire session could have been dedicated solely to participants having space to actually make the arts-based creations during the session when they can receive any guidance or ideas they may need and it would not weigh upon them as extra obligatory homework.

The semi-structured group interviews throughout the curriculum adhered to traditional understanding of interviews as conversations with the specific purpose of understanding what was in participants' minds (Merriam, 2001, p. 71). The curriculum accounted for the necessary pre-determined "group processes" of the group interviews by describing the protocols structuring them and the skills participants would utilize throughout (Merriam, 2001, p. 71). Some guiding questions were pre-prepared (those included in the curriculum in Appendix B and in the protocols in Appendices D through G) using Merriam's (2001) guidelines four types of questions (p. 77). Probes, such as those described above and illustrated in the transcript excerpt below, were impossible to anticipate or plan in advance, as they depended upon participants' narratives. This required, as researcher and "the primary instrument of data collection" as an interviewer, for me to be a "highly sensitive instrument" and be prepared to create probes in the moment that clarified and asked for more details without pressing "too hard and too fast"

(Merriam, 2001, p. 80). Though the probes necessarily responded to participants in-the-moment, I needed to be prepared to probe in a manner aligned with the purpose and approach of my study as a whole.

The group approach to interviewing in this stage and throughout the entire process of this curriculum ensured the simultaneous locality and interdependence inherent in abolitionist approaches and in freedom dreaming (Love, 2019; Kelley, 2002) and challenged the hegemonic individualism demanded by cultures of Whiteness (Singleton, 2015; DiAngelo 2018). The group interview approach also enhanced the curriculum design aspect of this research study, and it facilitated the application of the process illustrated in this study to any group of students, by any educator. In this study, aligned with abolitionist and restorative justice concepts of collectivity or “ubuntu” - that I exist because others exist (Klein, 2020) - individuals’ words loosely represented each participant as a case in the comparative case study, while the collaborative nature of questioning and vision-building created the slippage inherent in any attempts to bound individuals who are embedded in multiple, broader contexts (including the community created through this study).

While there are some common dangers of relying exclusively on group interviews, including the possibilities of students’ responses being informed by others or students simply agreeing with each other, these did not pose an issue in this study. First, the study produced re-storied narratives in dialogue with each other as opposed to seeking generalizable results – and therefore, if the group discussions deepened or expanded participants’ narratives, it only enriched the value of the results. In fact, per the study’s emphasis on unboundedness and collectively produced understanding through

dialogue, the collaborative and community elements of the group discussion were integral and did not sacrifice the validity of any results.

Through the first week's process, I noticed that starting with the Courageous Conversations protocol ended up stunting participants' engagement right from the start of meetings – as, based on my observations and their answers to my direct questions, they did not find it engaging and had barriers to fully understanding why we needed it in this context, which meant that – opposed to the purpose of the research - sessions began with me doing a heavy amount of the talking to prompt participants through the protocol. If this curriculum were applied to a larger class with more groups of students discussing simultaneously, or in any groups where the teacher-facilitator would not be consistently present, I strongly recommend that the teacher-facilitator to spend several days introducing the Courageous Conversations protocol to all participants involved and provide them the opportunity to practice utilizing the protocol in their small groups. Though this step was neither needed nor feasible in terms of time constraints during this study, it offers tremendous value in future iterations.

I also recognized, in the first two sessions that took place during Week 1, the remote environment posed challenges to authentic and organic conversation among participants. Our teachers have noted these challenges in terms of virtual discussion throughout the school year, impacted as it has been by COVID-19, so I was not very surprised to have encountered these issues myself but was a bit concerned by the magnitude of the issue. The first two sessions, during Week 1, felt stilted and geared more around turn-taking than listening and responding; the Zoom environment also

placed heightened responsibility on me to actively facilitate rather than engage in storytelling and dialogue.

In short, in Week 1, participants first explored their intersectional identities in a chart. Then, they had the option of creating an arts-based artifact, and in a group session they narrated their chart and/or their arts-based artifact. Both to support consistent, manageable attendance among participants and to support more organic and authentic conversation, starting with Week 2 I arranged for the four of us to meet in person at the school, utilizing social distance and CDC-aligned safety precautions.

Week 2

Week 2 engaged participants in photo elicitation and highlighted the importance of the comparative case study (CCS) approach. There were three key parts to this week, which can be seen in more detail in the full curriculum (Appendices B and E). First, participants and teacher-facilitators reflected on and described what Whiteness means and looks like to them, in group conversations. Then, participants and teacher-facilitators were directed to identify and take digital photographs of anything they viewed or perceived in their daily lives that made them think of Whiteness - both inside and outside of the school building. Then, participants and teacher-facilitators described their photographs in the context of group interviews, surfacing their perspectives on what Whiteness is, looks like, and means. Similar to Week 1, the photographs themselves were to be utilized primarily as a process - specifically, their creation was planned to inform participants' narration and the researcher's probing questions; they would not be formally analyzed or coded in the analysis stage.

This plan for photo elicitation channeled the overall benefits of arts-based research and research-creation, in this case using the medium of photography, and also offered profound connections to the three-axis approach of comparative case study. People interact with the world through a continuous series of sensory interactions, which we synthesize to create and also interpret our experiences. Therefore, multisensory activities and experiences must be included in qualitative data collection processes, with the goal of exploring the ways that the researcher, in conjunction with participants, is a co-creator of experiences and of place (Sweet, 2019). Visual media support the researcher in understanding what Sarah Pink (2008) refers to as peoples' "emplacement" or their place-making practices; visual representations support us in "empathetically imagin[ing] ourselves into the places occupied, and sensations felt by others," while accepting that I never truly replicate another's specific experience. Photo elicitation across spaces can offer insights into how place is constituted differently - the process of place-making - by different people, illuminating that even when there may be commonalities across perspectives, place can be marked and interpreted differently (Pink, 2008).

This connects photo elicitation and research-creation, in terms of its purpose and possibilities and its resistance to delimitation, to the unboundedness that Bartlett and Vavrus (2016) center in their framework for comparative case study - there is no singular or universal truth of place or time, and there is no limit to the way in which meaning-making travels across place(s) and time(s). A student's perception of Whiteness in the space of a virtual classroom, then, depends on an analysis of their perceptions of Whiteness - in comparison with the specific lenses of others, not in an effort to generalize but to generate an ever more complex understanding - across places and time, and an

understanding of how they make the place of the classroom and what it means to them. CCS demands examination of contexts including histories - and particularly in the historical axis of CCS, found objects can be utilized to illuminate the environments that contribute to and create the contexts for each participant (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). In this approach, students took or selected photographs or other images based on their surroundings to document and categorize (vis a vis Whiteness) ephemeral data that inform their contexts both inside and outside of the school building. This stage of the curriculum offered insights into participants' conceptions of Whiteness as they entered into the study and as they step outside of the school building each day, and it contributed to the process of tracing participants' perceptions of Whiteness not only in the literal space-context of a Humanities lesson but throughout numerous relevant and contributing (unbounded) contexts across space and time (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). This stage laid a strong foundation for the following stage, in which students focused on tracing their perceptions of Whiteness throughout a literacy-based lesson.

In addition to its function in culturally responsive methods, the autoethnographic element of this phase of the curriculum aligned with models of photo elicitation, as well, as the researcher's own "visual practices" are an important element of the "multilayered nature of how place is constituted" and the various, potentially divergent lenses through which place may be understood (Pink, 2008).

To set up the photo elicitation project in Week 2, at the end of Week 1 I modeled some of the photographs I had taken or found, briefly explaining how they each made me think of Whiteness. (For personal privacy, the photos are not included in an appendix, but they include: A photograph of me FaceTiming with my siblings, an NYPD car, and the

cover of an Indigo Girls album.) As we approached Week 2, I noticed that no participants had uploaded any photographs into their personal Google Classroom documents. I attempted to remind them via Google Chat and email to find some photographs if they were able. When we met during Week 2, no participants had uploaded any photographs. When I inquired about this, all participants expressed overwhelm from their classwork, which felt heightened to them during the pandemic because of the virtual aspect of their learning. They did not have the capacity for any “homework” on their own time in such an emotionally fraught, stressful, and COVID-19-impacted year; given the importance of various modalities and arts-based opportunities in the context of research-creation, rather than eliminate those elements entirely I realized that I would need to create space in our sessions for them to do these elements.

Fortunately, as mentioned earlier, after Week 1 I also realized that the online or Zoom-based setting was presenting many challenges to authentic and organic group discussion – and to storytelling. In the online forum, participants were more hesitant to share and deferred to a turn-taking approach. In the absence of body language or gestural information I found it challenging to interpret participants’ silence and to avoid directing the conversation. Though I had originally planned to conduct all sessions remotely, I was able to arrange for the four of us to meet in-person, employing social distancing and mask-wearing, for Weeks 2, 3, and 4.

This helped with carving out opportunities for arts-based expression during our sessions themselves to avoid adding homework to participants’ plates. I provided time at the start of Week 2 for participants to find or think of images that represented their daily experiences of Whiteness, reminding them of the photographs that I had modeled the

previous week. Each participant, with their laptops in front of them, was able to find at least one image or video that resonated, and they each narrated the connections between what they had found and Whiteness and fielded questions in the group interview setting.

In short, prior to Week 2 participants had the opportunity to take photographs or find images reflecting everyday experiences where they perceive Whiteness. Then, during our Week 2 group session, participants had some time to secure their images and then narrated them to the group.

Week 3

Week 3 of the curriculum deliberately bridged the “cultivating identity” stage of the HRL model into the “cultivating criticality” stage that prioritizes naming dynamics and analyzing power and oppression (Muhammad, 2020). This stage also most directly addressed the primary research questions of this study.

In the original plan, participants and I would practice and norm together first, and then participants would track their perceptions of Whiteness and how these perceptions made them feel in three virtual Humanities lessons. This is still recommended, if possible, in future iterations of this study. In this iteration, participants and I did not have the opportunity to practice norming with a video of instruction. We were able to discuss what this would look like, and participants offered examples of Whiteness they had perceived or encountered in previous classrooms during their school careers. This made me confident that we would be able to move forward with the classroom visits without officially norming. Additionally, due to scheduling limitations we were only able to conduct one classroom visit instead of three with each participant.

Then, as in each stage, participants shared their perceptions and resulting feelings in group interview settings, posing questions to each other. In this stage, participants also (in some occasions with the probing of the teacher-facilitator) described what they perceived in the portions of the lessons when they did not perceive Whiteness. Next, in the group interview format participants compared their perceptions of Whiteness within the Humanities lessons to their experiences in the school as a whole, including other classrooms. Finally, participants discussed if and how they thought their intersectional identities informed how and where they perceived Whiteness in the lessons.

During this stage, I collected notes during the Humanities lessons, and I planned for participants to do so as well. Similar to the previous stages, I planned that these notes would be used for their value not as products but as a process by which participants produce further, specific narratives - via initial presentations, the curiosities of peers, and the probing of the teacher-facilitator. In the study itself, participants found it too overwhelming to write down their perceptions and feelings in the moment (while also trying to keep up with the lesson) – but we were able to debrief the same day as all of those visits, just a little later in the afternoon, so the lesson was fresh in all of our minds.

In an effort to thoroughly examine contexts: Our school has deliberately named a collective effort to move towards abolitionist teaching, racial equity, and culturally responsive pedagogy. To this end, we have (including myself in my administrative position) developed specific structures to support teachers and teacher teams in the development of curriculum and in their lesson planning and facilitation. Our teacher teams have at least an hour of daily planning time, during which they can utilize our Planning Checklist of instructional priorities (see Appendix A), a number of which stem

directly from research around culturally relevant pedagogy. In a biweekly end-of-unit task analysis protocol, all content teams analyze their end-of-unit tasks and curriculum using lenses from Zaretta Hammond and Dr. Muhammad's research. Our staff engages in biweekly adult learning about racial equity and education, including Dr. Bettina Love's We Want to do More Than Survive as a grounding text, led by a Racial Equity Committee comprised of nine members of our staff; and several members of our staff engage in biweekly professional development led by Ramapo focused on restorative justice practices we can leverage to enhance our restorative justice work. One of the Humanities teams whose lessons participants experienced during this study had explicitly adopted aspects of the HRL from Dr. Muhammad into their overarching curriculum goals.

Thus the curriculum-as-method guiding this study (research-creation) was not an attempt to expose glaring or obvious examples of hegemonic Whiteness in literacy instruction that I as an administrator or teacher teams already suspected, had seen, or were aware of, but rather to surface students' voices and critical perspectives that we adult educators may be missing. What would be the purpose (or overall effect) of our movement towards abolitionism and freedom-dreaming as a staff if we do not listen to students to inform our actions, and to critique the alignment of our educator intentions with our impact? The research-creation fundamentally values students' intersectional perspectives and perceptions (of themselves, of their lives, and of the classroom and school) as always, in all circumstances, essential in generating crucial questions and possibilities for liberating and affirming literacy instruction and in our school-wide goal of pursuing abolitionist approaches.

Week 4

Lastly, Week 4 of the curriculum-as-study focused on freedom dreaming and vision-building. The curriculum-as-study planned for participants to create a third and final arts-based expression of their choice illustrating their vision for what a liberating literacy lesson would look, feel, and sound like to them, with their specific intersectional identities. The rationale and research behind leveraging arts-based expression as a process (versus a product or object) in research was explored above. Similar to the other stages of this curriculum-as-study, the arts-based creations in this section of the curriculum were not part of the formal data analysis or re-storying process but primarily served to generate probes and questions (and subsequently additional narrative).

In the study itself, during Week 4, participants were told they could utilize artistic media of their choosing – including poetry, drawing, or design on their computers - to express their visions for what a validating and liberating literacy-based lesson would feel and look like. I shared a graphic organizer with some guiding questions as an optional scaffold – which all participants opted to complete as their chosen form of brainstorming. (See Appendix M.) After Week 1, I had attempted to incorporate time in our sessions together for more arts-based opportunities, but I remain unsure if the issue was one of time, of participants' comfort creating art together in a small group, of the influence of my model (my arts-based expression) being in writing, or of participants' true preference to complete the graphic organizer. It is possible that, in a mixed-aged group, the younger participant(s) simply went along with what they saw the older participant(s) choosing to do – namely, the graphic organizer. As in Week 1, I recommend in future iterations of

this curriculum-as-study that added, structured time is provided in-session for students to have meaningful opportunities and models to create whatever art they truly choose.

Then, in a group discussion, participants shared their visions in the standard group interview setting and reflected on if and where Whiteness would exist in their visions as well as on the influence of their intersectional identities on those visions. By exploring whether Whiteness would exist in this liberatory lesson - and if so, where, and if not, how teachers could ensure it is not there - participants engaged with the “cultivating intellectualism” and “cultivating criticality” lenses of the HRL model (Muhammad, 2020). Participants then reflected on how their thinking changed over the course of the study. Lastly, they reflected on their experience of the study and their dynamics with me-as-researcher, particularly considering my intersectional identities.

The language utilized in developing the essential questions, primary objectives, and protocols (below) in part derives from Geneva Gay’s (2000) six elements of culturally responsive lesson plans - in which she names culturally responsive lessons as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. The framework for this stage of the curriculum drew from her research without imposing that framework on participants.

Data Collection Plan

The following data was collected in each stage of this curriculum-as-study. (This is also outlined in Appendix B.)

Week	Data Collected	Analysis (explored further in next section)
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1	Participants' and Researcher's Identity Charts	Artifact to support narrative; no analysis conducted.
1	Participants' Arts-Based Creations	(Optional) Artifact to support narrative; no analysis conducted. Will not be shared in appendices for anonymity.
1	Researcher Arts-Based Expression	Artifact; no analysis conducted.
1	Transcript from the Group Interview	In Vivo & Narrative Coding
1	Researcher Analytic Memos	In Vivo & Narrative Coding
2	Participants' Digital Photographs	(Optional) Artifact to support narrative; no analysis conducted. Not shared in appendices for anonymity.
2	Researcher's Digital Photographs	Artifact; no analysis conducted.
2	Transcript from the Group Interview	In Vivo & Narrative Coding
2	Researcher Analytic Memos	In Vivo & Narrative Coding
3	Participants' Handwritten Notes	(Optional) Artifact to support narrative; no analysis conducted. No written notes taken.
3	Transcript from the Group Interview	In Vivo & Narrative Coding
3	Researcher Analytic Memos	In Vivo & Narrative Coding
4	Participants' Arts-Based Creations	(Optional) Artifact to support narrative; no analysis conducted. Graphic organizers will not be included in appendices for anonymity.
4	Transcript from the Group Interview	In Vivo & Narrative Coding
4	Researcher Analytic Memos	In Vivo & Narrative Coding

I took several deliberate steps in order to effectively collect, organize, analyze, and re-story this quantity of data (I will explain shortly the details of the analysis and re-storying). First, in each of the four weeks, I had the group interview for that week transcribed, I analyzed and coded that week of data, and I drafted re-storied narratives from that week for each participant. Each week, I also collected all participant and researcher artifacts (including my analytic memos) in specific week folders within the Google Classroom for the study. Then, after the four weeks of data collection, rather than bearing the burden of coding, analyzing, and re-storying all of the data then, my final step was to organize the re-storied narratives in dialogue with each other to best illuminate the three axes of comparative case study.

Data Analysis

Coding took place after each stage, as well as after all four weeks were complete. Per many qualitative traditions, in this study data collection and analysis were simultaneous and integrated; coding was cyclical, with at least two cycles throughout each stage of the study (Merriam, 2001, p. 155; Saldana, 2016, p. 9). Throughout the study, I wrote and frequently reviewed my own observation notes to “stimulate critical thinking” and reflection throughout the process; these notes took the form of analytic memos during each stage of the study (Merriam, 2001, p. 163; Saldana, 2016). As this study values collective generation of knowledge, questions, and ideas, my (researcher) contributions to the narratives, in the form of probing questions contained within transcripts and analytic memos, were sometimes coded as well (Saldana, 2016, p. 17).

As I entered the study, I knew it would be possible that I would see additional artifacts that warranted coding – participants’ arts-based expressions in Weeks 1 and 4, their digital photographs from the Week 2 elicitation, and their handwritten notes in Week 3. Qualitative research requires the researcher “to create or adapt concepts relevant to the data rather than to apply a set of pre-established rules,” so I recognized that my process would inevitably evolve in direct response to the data collected (Merriam, 2001, p. 165). However, for several reasons – including that participants did not engage in the arts-based creations, photo elicitation, or handwritten notes in the way I had expected going into the study – my data collection, coding, and analysis process remained quite similar to my original plan.

In traditional multiple case study approaches, the two stages of data analysis would include “within-case” and “cross-case” (Merriam, 2001, p. 194). In this comparative case study, while comparison remained an important element, the bounds between “within” and “cross” were complicated, producing an analysis process in which one participant’s response to another might be incorporated into their personal narrative thread, for example. Narrative analysis, a central approach in this study, studies lived experiences through stories; critical and literary lenses can be used to interpret these narratives, as done in the analysis described above (Merriam, 2001, p. 157). Much like I have integrated my personal narrative vignettes that were written prior to the start of the study throughout these first three chapters, the narratives-as-results consist of vignettes of four participant narratives (re-storied by me) woven into each other and in dialogue with each other.

The data analyzed in each stage of this study consisted primarily of group interview transcriptions and researcher analytic memos. The analytic memos, written throughout the process of coding and data analysis, demanded researcher reflexivity, continuous reflection, and self-interrogation, providing written notes about the “reciprocal relationship between the development of a coding system and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon” (Saldana, 2016, p. 44). The analytic memos captured my “initial impressions” that informed my probing questions and interpretations at each stage of the study (Saldana, 2016, p. 58). These analytic memos, once analyzed, became additional personal narratives woven throughout the participants’ re-storied narratives. These narratives, written during the study (Chapter 4) and after the study (Chapter 5) rather than prior to it (as were those narratives in Chapters 1 through 3), enact the essential, autoethnographic aspect of the curriculum-as-study.

In each week of the study, coding was done by lumping, with code jottings distinct from the body of data (Saldana, 2016, p. 21). As discussed earlier, each round of coding focused on each individual participant as a case, while recognizing the fundamental unboundedness of comparative case study. After each week of the study, coding took place in two rounds. The first round of coding for each distinct week consisted of In Vivo coding, with a specific focus on references to Whiteness and other critical elements (e.g. race, identity, power dynamics). In Vivo coding is particularly valuable in studies featuring youth that focus on honoring participants’ voices, in large part because it focuses on the identification and preservation of verbatim words and phrases directly from participants, rather than imposing a researcher-created category right away (Saldana, 2016, p. 106). Not only does In Vivo coding prioritize participants’

authentic voices, which was important in the process of re-storying for the purpose of comparative case study, but it also enabled me-as-researcher to explore participants' perceptions of identity, race, and Whiteness through their narratives.

The second round of coding for each distinct week consisted of Narrative coding. This layer of coding assisted me in understanding the narrative-data's "storied, structured forms" and, as I moved into the final stage of re-storying, to "potentially create a richer aesthetic through a retelling" and through placing the re-storied narratives in dialogue with each other for comparison (Saldana, 2016, p. 154). I used the following narrative-based codes, along with more as they inevitably emerged: setting, text structure and organization (compare/contrast, cause/effect, sequence - beginning/middle/end), inner thinking, flashback and flash forward, conflict, resolution, aside or reflexive aside, climax, juxtaposition, subtext, dialogue, foreshadowing, onomatopoeia, figurative language, vivid imagery, protagonist and antagonist, primary and secondary characters, and character motivation. In the Narrative coding process, I did not always code data based on how the participant presented or narrated it; occasionally, I coded based on how (using context and evidence) I inferred that it could be incorporated into a restorying.

Re-Storying: Narratives-As-Results

The final product of this data analysis was twofold: First, the more transferable aspect of this study is a set of essential questions and thinking routines in the form of a curriculum-as-method (a process) that could be thoughtfully adapted, tailored, and revised by educators, using the guiding contexts and resources detailed here, for use in their specific context. This process produced a series of mini-narratives reconstructed

from the stories of participants-as-cases. Second, the interspersed personal narratives from me-as-researcher enact the autoethnographic aspect of the curriculum-as-method (a second prong of the process) and lay out questions inspired by the participants' stories that could generate possibilities, wondering, and imagining about the process towards liberatory literacy instruction.

After all stages of data collection and coding were complete, I used the codes not to move towards generalization or broader categories but to begin the process of re-storying and question generation. Re-storying via In Vivo and Narrative coding is a particularly powerful way to capture participants' inherent, "organic poetry" as well as recurring motifs across participants (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Saldana, 2016, p. 109). Pulling from the In Vivo and Narrative codes, I constructed mini-narratives for each participant-case. The mini narratives were braided together, organized around the three axes of comparative case study (transversal, horizontal, vertical).

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) emphasize that "comparing and contrasting are essential analytical moves" - in this study, that involved comparing and contrasting participants' narratives across different spaces such as homes, neighborhoods, and classrooms (horizontal axis); across scales of emotions and impacts of perceptions of Whiteness, and more (vertical axis); and through histories and contexts (transversal axis) (p. 7). The comparison across these unbounded cases, in tracing Whiteness vertically, horizontally, and transversally outside of and into literacy instruction and in developing a vision for liberating literacy instruction, was created - in conjunction with the reader - through the dialogue among these mini-narratives that simultaneously holds a collective and distinct individual voices narrating (hi)stories in response to the same essential

questions. The architecture of the final product requires that narratives be organized sequentially to aid comparison and contrast across all three axes - space, scale, and historical context - with a specific focus on Whiteness and race. This simple breakdown, with overlaps, drove the organization of the mini narratives in the study itself.

The comparing and contrasting throughout and among the narratives were not for the purpose of generalizing or seeking universal truths, but of generating new wonderings that could form the basis of another (or the next, for the same participants) curriculum-as-study. In addition to the architecture and organization of the mini-narratives, I incorporated an analytic stage (Chapter 5) at the end of the paper, after the interwoven narratives, to expand my analysis of the comparison across all three axes. This chapter focuses less on an analysis of participants' stories for the purpose of generalizing and more on building connections among research, the stories, and the questions generated in order to begin imagining what might come next in the pursuit of abolitionist or liberating literacy instruction.

These stages and processes ensure answers to my Research Questions, at least in the form of new narratives, as they utilize the research questions themselves as the guiding or essential questions for various stages of the study-as-curriculum. Through these four weeks, participants directly offered answers to the following primary and secondary Research Questions:

- When and how do queer, TGE, or cisgender female Students of Color perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction in their Humanities classrooms? How do these perceptions make them feel?

- How do their intersectional identities influence how, where, and when they perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction?
- What do the visions of this population for liberatory literacy instruction look like?
- How can educators create a space conducive to students' development of their own intersectional identities, examination of Whiteness in literacy instruction, and freedom dreaming about liberatory literacy instruction?
- What deliberate steps can educators make to create this space in their development of curriculum?

Arguably just as importantly, the entirety of this project offers a possible model (though by no means an exemplar) for researcher self-reflection and autoethnography—demanded by and integrated into the curriculum-as-study—that can influence the creation of a space of authentic sharing for intersectionally-marginalized participants. It also modeled an intersectional and abolitionist approach to research(-creation): While the curriculum structured around these questions could be replicated, the results of this iteration of the study would combine with the results of other iterations to generate more student visions, stories, and questions about liberatory and intersectional literacy instruction which guide and inform our collective progress towards abolitionism.

In October 2020, while digging through old emails, I found a draft of a short memoir I had worked on from 2008 until 2011. It appeared to be an accumulated series of vignettes across spaces and times, narrating aspects of my life story. By the time I'd written it, I had been immersed in activist communities and possessed some awareness of representational ethics and responsibility. However, revisiting those vignettes from a decade later, specifically those depicting or involving my former students, left me disappointed and harboring shame.

In the vignettes, I had honestly addressed my subject positioning and flaws throughout, to the point of feeling vulnerable just reading through. But numerous descriptors I had applied to students - "suspiciously smug," "excuse-seeking,"

more - leapt off the page and up Argyris' Ladder of Inference. I had thought I knew my students, had thought I built strong relationships with them; and while I had, and while I had understood the importance of explicit statements of anti-racism and anti-oppression, I had not developed a sense of the damage I could do with assumptive language. My words laid bare biases that had been masked by my intentions.

Elena Aguilar (2018) warns educators against jumping to hasty conclusions about students' (or colleagues') barriers. She explains that we tend to assume barriers are gaps of will - that the person in question just doesn't want to do differently, or better - when barriers are, in fact, most often gaps in skills, capacity, systemic oppression, or support. The way to avoid such false conclusions is to remain low-inference and to nurture the belief that everyone wants to succeed in whatever way they define success. Mindsets and thought patterns can and must be practiced and deliberately fostered.

Limitations

This study amplifies and centers the voices that must lead - and have always led - movements towards intersectional justice and liberation, and it explores the role and positioning of those of us who are educators with positional power, White privilege, and our own intersectional identities in this pursuit. It provides a replicable curriculum - a set of guiding questions for students and the facilitator – and builds toward a starting-point for freedom dreaming and vision-building and that can be implemented by not only teachers but school leaders, district leaders, and researchers alike. In light of the ongoing violence facing intersectionally-marginalized students both inside and outside of the classroom, it is as urgent as ever for educators to deliberately create space for this population of students to freedom-dream and conceptualize liberatory literacy.

A study of this nature does not have limitations - it has parameters. This particular iteration of the study focused on a small group of students at one New York City middle school and homed in on participants' perceptions of Whiteness in literacy instruction and

in their lives as a jumping-off point; this could be broadened to include more students across spaces and times and to probe their perceptions of other hegemonic systems in literacy instruction (e.g. heteronormativity, homonormativity, sexism, classism, and more). While I aimed to engage autoethnography and reflexivity as effectively as possible throughout the study, as a biased individual with positional power I undoubtedly skewed these results in some way, shape, or form - which only further justifies the requirement of continuous autoethnography to begin with.

Despite these parameters, this study has powerful potential implications for instruction and for school and district leadership. The utility of this curriculum in any school context, as a means by which to promote educator self-reflection and self-interrogation, center students' voices, and value and follow the leadership of those most marginalized, can and must directly inform the instructional and pedagogical decision-making of individual teachers and administrators alike. The stories illuminated and questions generated through this curriculum, whether within one classroom or across an entire school, can flag the trail that educators must blaze towards liberatory, intersectional, abolitionist, and restorative literacy practices. Throughout the process, with its demand on researcher reflexivity and considerations, educators' knowledge of intersectionality and of ourselves will deepen.

The study also has potential impact on a policy, political, and research level, and could influence the field of Literacy Studies as we know it. By refusing to employ a framework of single- or multiple-axis identities and insisting on the locality and specificity demanded by intersectionality and enacted through narrative inquiry, the study challenges the violence and erasure potentially perpetuated within the field and policy

when - regardless of intention - students are reduced to one or two vectors of who they are. In this way, the study is a call to action, insisting that all aspects of students' intersectional identities are salient, relevant, and important at all times regardless of the topic on the table. This demands that future studies explore the valence of students' full identities at all times when engaging with literacies, including the valence of gender and sexual identities outside of discussion focused explicitly on gender and sexuality.

The study offers an intersectional, story-based model for future research in which queer, TGE, and cisgender female Students of Color can be fully seen and their unique, specific voices and lived experiences honored. It also illustrates an attempt to reimagine traditional researcher-participant dynamics and create a study in which participants are not Others but co-creators of what constitutes and is respected as knowledge.

Additionally, the study challenges prevailing, deficit-based mindsets about intersectionally-marginalized students by reframing them as not simply the most oppressed but as our most creative visionaries - thereby also challenging the composition of our policymakers themselves. What intersectional perspectives and stories are at the table, and which are missing? How would the current story of my classroom (or my school, or my district) change if the missing stories were present and centered?

This paves the way for countless more studies, in Literacy Studies as well as other fields, that approach intersectionality through the question: How do our intersectional identities not only inform how we are seen (and treated in turn) but also inform our ways of seeing?

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Narratives-As-Results

This study consisted of me crafting and implementing an inquiry- and arts-based curriculum-as-method, informed by Dr. Muhammad's Historically Responsive Literacy framework and other research around abolitionist and culturally responsive teaching. This curriculum, which offers a process as a product, was strategically implemented with three queer, transgender or gender expansive (TGE), or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx middle school students, with the recognition that the liberation of the most intersectionality marginalized students necessarily leads to the liberation of all students; this curriculum could be transferred to other settings and participants, but in that transfer this originating participant population must be considered to inform modifications for context. The curriculum-as-method supported participants in telling stories about their intersectional identities, their experiences with Whiteness and perceptions of it both inside and outside of their literacy instruction in school, and their visions for what liberatory literacy instruction could be. The study explored and enacted one potential way in which an educator (in this case, a White, queer, and transgender administrator) can, by way of this curriculum-as-method in combination with autoethnography, create spaces for co-creation of knowledge and freedom dreaming with participants.

In this chapter, participants' stories are woven together and loosely organized to flow with the three axes of comparative case study. The chapter flows from each axis in terms of tracing participants' perceptions of Whiteness and their impact, from the transversal to the horizontal to the vertical. The choice to start with the transversal grounded the narratives-as-results in unboundedness, stretching across contexts and time

- including ancestry - to provide a breadth of context about the participants and their personal immersion in legacies of race and Whiteness. Throughout the horizontal axis, participants' perceptions of Whiteness across different spaces and locations in their daily lives, including into and through schools and classrooms. The vertical axis wrapped up the comparative case study portion of the narratives-as-results by exploring participants' perceptions of Whiteness across different scales, including their encounters with Whiteness on a national or international scale via social media.

The closing features metacognitive reflections from participants on questions I posed throughout the study: How did participants feel working with me, as a White, queer, and trans administrator and researcher? How did they perceive their dynamic with me? How did their intersectional identities inform how they read that dynamic? The closing also captures as close to a before-and-after reflection from participants as I was able to solicit in this particular iteration of the study. I posed the questions: How did this experience feel? How did you grow or change from this experience?

This organization, leveraging comparative case study, is importantly imperfect and subject to differing interpretation of how the narratives could have been organized. As foregrounded in comparative case study, and in alignment with intersectionality theory and narrative inquiry, identities and other categories are simultaneously impactful and unboundable. The tremendous amount of slippage among axes and categories throughout these results was not only expected but justified the methodology to begin with. Interspersed throughout are italicized, personal narratives featuring my self-reflection, which unlike the vignettes in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 (which were necessarily

created prior to the study) in this chapter represent my responses to participants and my autoethnography as the study progressed.

The presentation of the study's results aims for fidelity to my methodology and purpose. By a deliberate design driven by intersectionality theory and narrative inquiry, the products of this curriculum-as-method are not generalizable results or researcher-imposed meanings but participants' localized, personal stories and my (researcher) continued autoethnographic self-reflection. In interacting with these narratives, the reader makes meaning - generating questions, possibilities, and ideas about how Whiteness impacts this group of participants and what liberatory literacy instruction might look like for them - and, owning that power as meaning-maker, continues to conduct the ongoing self-examination (autoethnography) necessary for these questions and ideas to move forward the pursuit of abolitionist teaching.

By engaging the researcher and reader in this process, the narratives-as-results presented here speak to my primary research questions:

- When and how do queer, TGE, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx middle school students perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction in their Humanities classrooms? How do these perceptions make them feel?
- How do their intersectional identities influence how, where, and when they perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction?
- What do the visions of this population for liberatory literacy instruction look like?

In conjunction with participants' stories, my personal vignettes, in which I reflect on my participation in and decisions in facilitating this small group space and also on the curriculum-as-study itself, speak to the secondary research questions:

- How can educators create a space conducive to students' development of their own intersectional identities, examination of Whiteness in literacy instruction, and freedom dreaming about liberatory literacy instruction?
- What deliberate steps can educators make to create this space in their development of curriculum?

To reiterate, the process of answering these questions insists that the reader and researcher engage participants' stories at face value, name the reactions, questions, and ideas raised by the specific participants, and do the work of self-interrogation necessary to open our own minds to what possibilities emerge from participants' intersectional narratives.

For increased anonymity in a small school, I do not identify the grade level of the individual participants. Additionally, I did not attempt to create replacement names for the participants. They are signified as J----, L----, and M----, respectively. I could not presume to replicate the personal and cultural significance of names; any attempt to do so (especially by someone external like myself) would run the risk of misleading or oversimplifying the complexity of the participants' identities, stories, and voices. Their letter designations do not correspond with their real names.

Transversal Axis: Tracing Whiteness Across Contexts & Time Periods

J---- is a gifted and engaging storyteller, at each stage of every session offering personal and family anecdotes that highlight nuance - nobody is just one thing. J---- was born near 218th Street in Washington Heights, at a location “across the street from a Target”. She has grown up in Manhattan, speaking Spanish and English from birth. Widespread ignorance about sexual identity and terminology is a point of frustration for her - when she identifies herself as “in between” bisexual and pansexual, “people get confused” because they think those are the same thing. (In these situations, J---- ends up explaining the gender spectrum and sexual fluidity.) She does not know of having any disabilities, and there are none diagnosed or on school record. “Depending on the day,” J----’s pronouns are she/her/hers or they/them/theirs, so her pronouns will be alternated throughout.

L---- is thoughtful and unhesitatingly honest. She often waits to speak after more talkative members of the group and elaborates upon, responds to, or clarifies what has been said or asked. She was born in Washington Heights in New York City and identifies as Hispanic American and as bisexual. Though her family is Catholic, she thinks she may be atheist - “I don’t really think there’s a heaven or hell” - but she realizes that this could be an ongoing process, and she simply doesn’t “know what I’m choosing” yet. Though she did not mention it to the group during our sessions, she has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for a learning disability. L----’s pronouns are she/her/hers.

M---- is very expressive, either in writing (when there is more than one other person present) or verbally (one-on-one). In the first meeting together as a group, which occurred on Zoom, M---- shared a well-designed PowerPoint about his identity and asked me to read it aloud for him. The presentation included his height, astrological sign, things he has never tried (“explore out of this country”), eye color (“caca = poop”), favorite cereal, hobbies, and what he wants to be when he grows up (“gamer, mafia boss, singer, or actor”). M---- always signs off virtual sessions - via Zoom or chat - by saying “have a good day” and “stay safe.” M---- identifies his race as Mexican-American, his gender as transgender, and his sexual orientation as “Questioning: Either straight, bisexual, or pansexual.” He speaks both Spanish and English and has since he was born in New York City. He was raised Christian; his parents are Catholic. While M---- does not have an IEP or official diagnoses, he shared that he has social anxiety and ADHD. M----’s pronouns are he/him or they/them, so these will be alternated throughout.

In the pre-session focused on introductions, norm-setting, and preparing participants for the first full meeting, M---- did not unmute to speak verbally and only contributed to the chat in writing. After that pre-session, and before our first official group meeting, I checked in with each participant on Google chat (which has been a staple of communication for our school during the COVID-19 pandemic). M---- shared that because of his social anxiety in groups, he would prefer to type into the chat box and for me to read his typing aloud for the group. This threw a little bit of a wrench into my vision for the meetings, in part because I’d noticed the discussion was a bit more stilted and focused on turn-taking via Zoom - it was less organic than I had hoped. (This was not different from our school-wide observations about the transition from student in-person discussion to virtual discussion in content classes.) That said, I knew it was most important for M---- to continue to participate, and so I immediately confirmed that we could operate however he was most comfortable. After the first session, I arranged for the group to meet in person.

Question generated: How could I have better anticipated both students’ possible needs and the impact being remote would have on the sessions?

In the pre-session, just before M---- shared his own social anxiety, I had modeled a brainstorm of many of my intersecting identities, including that I had experienced anxiety and depression that had required medication when I was younger. Had my mention of my own anxiety opened a door for M---- to name his? On the flip side, had my model (including only anxiety, depression, and a mention that I have “no learning disabilities that I know of”) had a limiting effect - for example, had it made it more difficult for someone like L---- to either feel comfortable sharing about her learning disability or recognize that it was relevant for her to name? Did my personal sharing open doors, or close them - or both? When I am in multiple power positions, what is the optimal amount of sharing to be authentic and vulnerable without inadvertently limiting the scope of thought and discourse of the group?

Questions generated: What are the benefits and dangers of teacher (or facilitator) modeling? How are those benefits or dangers magnified when the model involves personal identities?

In our first official session together, J---- had been the first to pose a question of another participant, asking M---- “Do your parents know that you are transgender?” M---- typed “No” into the chat. I then followed up, explicitly repeating that participants do not need to answer any questions they do not want to answer, and asking M---- “How are you feeling about that?” M---- replied “I don’t want to answer it.” I instinctively felt bad, leaping to the (unfounded) assumption that I had pushed too far; in that moment, I was able to pause this internal narrative before I got carried away, and remind myself that this is not about me. I had explicitly stated that participants should say “I don’t want to answer” at any point, and it was up to me to live up to that promise and celebrate participants’ boundaries. I said “Okay, that’s completely fine, M----. Thank you for letting me know.” Reflecting afterwards, I know there are numerous reasons why M---- may have responded that way, not the least of which is the fact that they were logged on from home.

Question generated: During our first full session together, was I able to respond to a moment of participant honesty in a way that fostered trust? How do I know?

J---- does not know their religion - yet. J----’s grandmother encourages them to follow their own path to religious and spiritual understanding; she tells J---- that she does not want to impose religion on her grandchild. J----’s roots prior to their grandmother also remain somewhat unknown to them. Identifying as both “Black” and “Hispanic,” J----

has a growing understanding of the history of enslavement that their Black ancestors undoubtedly endured and survived, but they “don’t know much about Hispanic history”.

Most of what J---- does know about her ancestry and heritage is about her grandmother, who lives with, raises, and has custody (or as close to official custody as anyone) of J----. Her grandmother immigrated from the Dominican Republic, leaving behind her “really poor” family and her siblings who all shared one room, with the hope of sending money back from the United States. Her journey took her through Mexico, where she was the victim of a robbery, to California, and finally to Manhattan. J----’s grandmother, whom J---- describes as “open to people of different races” because she “knows how hard it is” for People of Color to get jobs, openly talks about being the first person from J----’s family to immigrate to the United States and the challenges she faced along the way to becoming a United States citizen. J---- infers from this that “she doesn’t have a problem with it” and “she’s never been embarrassed about” her immigration story or her identities.

One of L----’s parents was born in a country in South America, and the other was born in Mexico. Sometimes, people “mistake” and “misidentify” L----, so she had to clarify with her mother: “Are we American, Hispanic, or South American?” Her mother firmly established that “I am from [the South American country], but *you* are American.”

When J----’s grandmother immigrated to New York City, she opened a salon in Washington Heights, which she then ran for fourteen years as her livelihood. It was taken

away “by a White guy” who had taken advantage of her lack of fluency in English; he had “made her sign something, telling her it was for rent,” and she had believed him because she “had no reason not to.” After fourteen years of running her salon, however, he took the space from her, saying “you signed this.” Though she took it to court, at the time the “courts didn’t understand” her because she spoke only Spanish, and she lost her salon.

When I noted that J---- and her grandmother have a very special relationship and referred to her grandmother as “resilient,” J---- said, “yeah, she’s always been that way.” As participants began sharing personal details of themselves and their families, the challenges they have faced, and in some cases horrible experiences they have had, I had to be continuously mindful and reflect on how and when to respond. On the one hand, I did not want to exude a sense of “White surprise” or outrage that is harmful and would also erode trust; and on the other hand, I did not want to appear to condone or be uncaring about the experiences. When the issue of tensions or conflicts with family members arose, I also did not want to veer into the realm of judgment – beyond validating and empathizing with participants’ own critical analysis of the situation.

Question generated: Given my specific positionings and intersecting identities, what is the most effective way to respond to students’ sharing of hardships to foster trust and encourage continued exploration, sharing, and reflection?

M---- describes their mother as straight, female, strict, very caring, and kind of supportive of LGBTQ+; she “makes me food all day,” “helps me out,” and “gave me this life,” which makes M---- happy to be “in a good family.” Their mom identifies as Mexican, and not Mexican-American, and was born in Mexico, which M---- describes as a “lovely” place where you “don’t have to pay rent” and have “freedom” - such as having any pets you want. The flip side, they mention, is that you “have to work all day” even “if it’s raining” because the country is “not really rich.” M----’s mother walked all the way to the

United States from Mexico, a tremendous trip that brought her (M---- thinks) over the border in Texas. She made her way to New York to meet up with her brother who was here, and to get a job that he had secured for her before M---- was born. In New York, she met M----'s dad, and then had M----; both parents continued to work until M----'s brother was born. M----'s mom regularly takes her children on walks to the park on 145th Street where she met M----'s dad, and where he proposed to her.

When I shared that I recently heard a speaker describe privilege as “something you don’t have to worry about,” J---- immediately thought of their grandfather (their father’s father). He is deaf-blind, so “it is hard to communicate,” but they have found a way, and they used to spend time sitting in their grandfather’s room, talking while he was hooked up to oxygen to start the day. “The only reason I know about racism,” J---- says, is because of him. He’s “gone through many things,” such as “people trying to hit him or spit on him” because he is darker-skinned. When he immigrated from the Dominican Republic to New York, his wife died, and he had to raise J----’s dad on his own. Despite his personal experiences, J---- explains that he still “believes White people are more,” and spends his time exclusively with White or light-skinned people, allowing them “to say the n-word.” In contrast, J----’s dad “doesn’t allow White people to say the n-word,” but their father does allow non-Black, non-White people to say it, which they think “is not great.” This type of permission leads to another family member saying it “all the time,” even though he is “Whiter than my mom.” J---- describes logging on to Zoom for remote classes during the COVID-19 pandemic while this person is in the background, “screaming on a video game and saying the n-word.” It’s “embarrassing.”

Teachers and I have had many, ongoing conversations since March 2020 about how the pandemic has affected and is affecting students. While I have been aware that there are many reasons why home spaces may not be optimal learning environments for some students, this illuminated a very specific example – and one that might be exacerbated as our school more deliberately and strategically orients towards abolitionism. How much more magnified might J----’s embarrassment be in this situation precisely because their Humanities class centers anti-racism and abolitionism? Does this heightened contrast (as they expressed it) between their home space and their learning in school heighten a sense of tension or alienation with their family? If so, how could they be supported in surfacing these experiences and working through them in their classes? Rather than suggesting that abolitionist teaching should not be our goal, this suggests that perhaps this important goal simply demands we anticipate and develop ways to mediate these specific issues.

Questions generated: How and where can we create opportunities for students to use their culturally responsive, anti-racist, and social justice-oriented learnings to problem-solve personal or family situations and experiences? Where are we providing opportunities for students to bring to the table their everyday perceptions of and experiences with race, racism, and Whiteness in order to leverage them for learning and help navigate tensions that crop up (and perhaps grow) for students? How are we centering and immediately involving families in this ongoing conversation, as well, as an integral part of supporting our students?

In early 2020, during a lockdown in New York City due to the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, someone very close to L---- passed away from COVID-19.

Recently, L----’s adult relative was watching “a documentary” that propagated numerous “overused stereotypes” about Mexicans, including Donald Trump’s statements - “they’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime” - about Mexicans bringing drugs into the United States. L----’s relative (who is not Mexican) repeated this stereotype, and L---- challenged him, because she is part Mexican, and “it was offensive.” In response to L----

's stories about upsetting and offensive stereotypes of Mexican people, J----, confirming that these stereotypes are problems, shared that her grandmother "still holds" some of these stereotypes after being robbed while immigrating from the Dominican Republic through Mexico.

Horizontal Axis: Tracing Whiteness Across Locations & Spaces

In our first session, J---- explained that when they think of Whiteness, they think of "a White person" because "it would be weird to think about somebody else." Since that session, though, J--- has demonstrated attentiveness to various meanings and interpretations of race and racial designations. When a cousin referred to "anything loud" as "Black music," J---- challenged how their cousin "categorized Black people" and conducted an in-the-moment analysis. While their cousin's racialized association is "strange" because her Mom and brothers are Black, J---- recognizes that while their cousin is Dominican, as a light-skinned person their cousin has "had more of the privileges White people have" and "doesn't understand what it's like to be a Black person" even though her brothers and mother are darker-skinned. J----'s cousin often thinks "race is about... how much money you have" - which J---- implies is another vestige of light-skinned privilege.

During our first session, when asked about his initial thoughts about Whiteness, M---- stated "kind," "maybe British," and "helpful." They then added "and transgender,"

explaining “I’ve met a lot of White people who are part of the LGBTQ+.” When probed about their perception that more LGBTQ+ and transgender people are White, M---- cites social media and particularly the trans women and trans men he sees there - almost all of whom are White. He also affirms that White people “have a high chance of being trans” based on his observations of social media. His explanation for this is that White people “feel more comfortable in the opposite gender,” maybe because “they have family issues” or were “sexually harassed in the past.” In LGBTQ+ communities, M---- says “mostly I see White people,” with “a bit of Black people,” and some Mexicans, but not Asians - “I never really see them being a part of LGBTQ+.”

Two of M----’s perceptions concerned me: The first that LGBTQ+ and trans people are mostly White (particularly since M---- is Mexican American), and that it seemed like he had already internalized some pathologizing and patronizing explanations for trans-ness (especially around sexual assault) that unfortunately run rampant and have a long history in medical gatekeeping. It makes me wonder about so much that he was not really able to express in response to my probing: What impact does it have on him to be Mexican American and transgender, but to think most transgender people are White? This conversation made me acutely aware of how often I shared elements of my story as a queer and transgender person; even when solicited by participants, I tried to remain brief and shift the focus back to them, recognizing that while my vulnerability and modeling are important, M---- already has models of White transgender people. And where do M----’s pathologizing ideas about trans-ness come from – widespread misinformation and bigotry, or his own personal experiences? Most importantly, how should I have responded?

I opted not to challenge his mindsets or disagree outright, with the intention of challenging my own educator impulse to “teach” - which all too often, against the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy and abolitionism, ends up didactic and with me “telling” in a way that could dilute or oversimplify a complex issue. In my attempt to preserve a student-centered space focused on students doing the reflective work and storytelling, I did not want to risk a sudden jolt into an “I, as the adult, have the right answers” dynamic – and so I simply tried to ask some follow-up questions, though these were not particularly fruitful with M----, and I failed to ask about the association between trans-ness and sexual assault. Did I

do damage by not explicitly “teaching” about this – or by not making sure I posed some kind of question for M----’s reflection?

Questions generated: How is it most impactful for me to respond when a student reveals (what I perceive to be) misguided, problematic or potentially damaging mindsets or thinking? What is my place in this conversation, given my identities? In an inquiry-based culture, when – if ever – should I resort to “telling”?

Once, when walking on the sidewalk in her neighborhood with her grandmother, a White woman perceived J---- as Muslim, she thinks, based on the woman’s commentary - a recurring perception that J---- has tried to make sense of by guessing that people “think I’m Indian” because of her features and “I don’t have a Spanish accent” when speaking English. This woman attempted to spit on her. J---- expressed more surprise that the attack occurred in public - “not even in a private place!” - than the fact that it happened to begin with.

“My mom - she’s crazy.” J---- manages to say this matter-of-factly and with an undertone of care. Her mother, who is Hispanic and the daughter of J----’s grandmother, is currently in a mental hospital. J---- says this “is okay”; her mother, she says, has a lifelong “drug and alcohol problem.” Her mother and father met through drugs, and though her father was able to stop, he tends to keep his distance from the area and from J----’s mother in order to stay clean - a decision J---- appears to understand and respect. J----’s father, who is dark-skinned, and whom J---- describes as Black (though he does not identify as Black but as Dominican), tends to experience challenges when interacting with her mother. J---- says that her dad “is a scary person to other people,” which seems at least in part due to racist perceptions based on his skin color. “Every time” her mother attacks him and the

police are called, they always arrest him “even though he’s the one with bruises,” believing her mother because “she’s light-skinned, so why would she lie?”

As J---- began to share more details about her life, family, and experiences, I find myself getting uncomfortable writing about these elements of her story. I catch myself wondering “How much of this should I share?” and considering aspects to remove – not for anonymity, I am able to recognize, but to avoid grappling with my positioning as a White person with a quite different story than J----’s. Even areas of potential connection, such as drug and alcohol abuse and addiction, are starkly divergent. I experienced a momentary impulse to allow my cognitive awareness of my problematic White gaze to transform into an excuse for me to avoid having to engage, and as an excuse to censor J----’s story whenever it makes me uncomfortable or poses a challenge to me as the researcher. I caught myself before succumbing to this, and I share this moment of internal reckoning. As a White person, I run the risk of leveraging my academic language and theoretical understanding of race to shield myself from messiness and feelings - and thereby to perpetrate harm.

It is not an easy task for me to share J----’s story, and utterly impossible for me to do so without infusing any of my own biases and interpretations, but that is no reason not to try – especially when the alternative is an even more self-centered display of power (editing another person’s narratives based just on my emotions). How dare I consider censoring J----’s story for my own comfort and ease of writing? And additionally, reflecting on comparative case study, every aspect of J----’s narrative is critical to her intersecting identities and experiences, and any story that she tells can (and often does) lead to a richer understanding of her perceptions of Whiteness and the impact of those perceptions on her. I cannot escape my positioning, and I must not run from it. I have no choice but to lean in and do my best, with my best entailing continuous self-interrogation: Why am I feeling uncomfortable? What does that reaction tell me that I have internalized? Am I uncomfortable about differences? Am I feeling pity? Am I doubting what J--- is saying? Am I trying to relate, or to distance myself – am I making it about me?

Questions generated: What strategies do I need to use to ensure that I can name and appropriately handle my own emotions, biases, and triggers and to keep the focus on students? What do I need to anticipate and be prepared for in advance of opening these spaces?

L---- struggles with anti-Blackness when it crops up within her family. Recently, her light-skinned adult relative said “the n-word, with the hard ‘r’” at the end, in front of L---

-’s grandfather, who is “literally Black.” L---- “tried to educate” her uncle, but though she is “fluent in Spanish,” she “can’t say words correctly” and her uncle continued to use the slur. L----’s sister was “disappointed,” too, because like L---- she had been “educated in Black Lives Matter” and in “justice.” After “trying to explain” but finding it hard to “spit out the words” - both because of her limitations in Spanish and because of her need for time when verbally communicating - so her uncle would understand, L---- ran to her room to get away from his use of the slur while her grandfather asked her uncle “Do you not like Black people?” Her uncle later apologized to L----, saying that something was “wrong in his heart.” L---- connects this behavior to her uncle not being “taught about racism” and also to Whiteness because of “being blind” to racism and not knowing it exists.

Colorism shows up in J----’s home and personal life: Her grandmother has been vocal about associating J----’s father’s Blackness with negative attributes, and when J---- does “something she doesn’t like,” she will sometimes say “you’re just like your dad.” When J---- addresses the anti-Blackness, her grandma excuses or dismisses it, asserting that when they name their experiences with anti-Black racism, “dark-skinned people” just “want attention.” J---- spent one year in foster care around the age of seven or eight due to her parents’ break up and what sounds like sexual assault from an adult who is no longer in her life, but otherwise she has grown up with her grandmother as her caretaker and rock. Her grandmother has what is as close to official custody of her as anyone because she has been the primary, stable presence in J----’s life.

J---- describes these occurrences, and her vocal disagreement with some of her grandmother's views, without indicating any fear of my or other participants' perceptions or judgments. She also shares a plethora of stories that illustrate that while J---- takes issue with some of her grandmother's thinking or actions (and often says as much), it absolutely does not reduce her grandmother to one dimension, tarnish the ways in which J---- looks up to her, or negate her utmost importance in J----'s life. This reminds me of the benefit and importance of creating space for full stories. Seeing how organically a both/and mindset, which requires a sophisticated emotional skill set to maintain in light of experiences that are painful or confusing, emerges from J---- inspires me to dig deeper within myself to better hold seemingly contradictory ideas at once, both for the sake of challenging White supremacy culture and also for wholeness of narrative and fullness of humanity. I have personally turned to more words from adrienne maree brown, this time Emergent Strategy, to embrace this process (brown, 2017).

Questions generated: How can I foster the mindset that nobody is just one thing and the belief that nobody is reducible to one part of who they are? Where do I (and we) make time for unchallenged, uncensored storytelling in the classroom – and how might this be valuable and centered? How was my autobiographical and narrative process in the first three chapters absolutely essential to – and inextricable from – my direct work with students through this curriculum-as-study?

M---- says he doesn't "really think about racism that much," and that he thinks more about "God, my family," and "maybe trans people, LGBTQ in my life." When race comes up, it is "maybe other races, but not really White." The first thing M---- does, when talking about his family and conversations about race, is to rave about Mexican food, which he wants "to eat more of than American food." Then he shifts into what he stands for: All religions, that Native Americans are "not savages," that Asians "are not viruses," and Mexicans "are not drug lords." He and his family have been impacted by negative stereotypes about Mexicans, and M---- defends against accusations of overuse of drugs or alcohol by describing his community's parties as "drinking for celebration" and "tradition," noting: "We're trying to have freedom." If a White person goes "to a Mexican party," he asserts, "you will have no regrets!" There are treats, pinatas, amazing

music and food, and more. Stereotypes upset M----, who names their inherent and racist hypocrisies: A White person can be “drinking too much” and have “eight bottles a night” but “my family had two or three,” and they are the ones who are judged.

When in foster care for about a year, the woman who was J----’s primary case worker made assumptions about her foster mother, who was Black, asking “does that family do drugs?” When dropping J---- off at her foster home and seeing J----’s Black new foster mother, she asked “are you sure you’re safe here?” and when she returned for visits she asked J---- “are they trying to poison you?” J---- states that these assumptions stemmed from her foster family’s skin color. J---- connected the case worker’s racial biases with her heteronormative views, as well - she said to J---- at times “a man is supposed to be with a woman, regardless.” When this case worker met with J----’s mother and grandmother, she looked at J----’s mother - and her very light skin, compared to J----’s - and asked, judgmentally, “you dated a Black guy?”, to the embarrassment of J---- and her mother. When J----’s father and aunt tried to visit her or get custody, the case worker did not trust them and feared that they would “kidnap” her, insisting that they were not J----’s real relatives; but she allowed J----’s lighter-skinned grandmother to visit and eventually get custody of J----.

J----’s awareness of her own race is nuanced and complex. Despite her darker skin standing out within much of her immediate family, she readily recognizes situations in which she has received benefits of having lighter skin than others. When in foster care,

she was bused to a different school than the other kids there, who were Black and darker-skinned; she ended up in a White-majority school for that year.

At first, I found myself wondering if the case worker's questions, like "are you safe here?", were standard or required for all foster children and families. Then, I paused and considered why my impulse might have been to think that. Was it an impulse to doubt J----'s interpretation, and if so was it because she is young or because she is Black and Hispanic? Was it some kind of investment in someone in a positioning (in terms of responsibility for children) that is not entirely unlike my own, with whose immersion in a nightmarishly bureaucratic system perhaps I unconsciously identify with? By the end of J----'s story, I realized that the case worker's intention in asking questions like "are you safe here?" were not the point. J----'s impression was what mattered, and that was grounded in a relationship extending far beyond any specific question or comment. Understandably, from J----'s perspective, this case worker had already proven to be racist, and in light of this even a potentially standard or seemingly innocuous question (to someone like myself looking in from the outside on any singular incident) has a different impact that must be validated.

*During our second official session together, I fully realized that I had heard about J----'s grandmother before: J---- had shown her grandmother the story about me in our school newspaper, which stated I am trans and queer. The possibility that this was a litmus test for J---- to gauge her grandmother's reaction to queerness or transness resonated even more powerfully in light of J----'s description about her anxieties with her sexual identity. At first, hearing that from J---- made me happy, to be an example of an open, transgender, queer educator – and that her grandmother had responded so positively to the story about me. **And** I must ask another question that is harder to ask, that moves beyond the simplicity of single-axis representation: How much of J----'s grandmother's approval of or positive response to me stemmed from her acceptance of my queerness and transness, and how much stemmed from my Whiteness and/or positional power in spite of my other identities? What impact does the answer to this question have on J----? As I have learned (eventually, and with much help) from many circumstances throughout my life, including some in which I lashed out verbally at others under the presumption that my marginalized identities were under attack, sometimes what I have thought is about queerness or trans-ness is, in fact, about Whiteness.*

Question generated: Given my inextricable intersecting identities, how can I continue to unlearn the myth that my queerness and transness are separable from my Whiteness? How can I more consistently and more immediately interrogate even (or especially!) circumstances that feel oppressive or triggering around gender and sexual identity, to examine the role of my Whiteness in the situation and in my emotional response?

M---, like the other participants, is in a developmental time of rapid change and heightened anxieties. By our second session together, he had already shifted in his identity, saying “I thought I was gender fluid” or non-binary a month ago, but had started to realize “that I’m actually much more comfortable being a man than woman” and may now be identifying more as male. He maintained both he/him and they/them as ideal pronouns. He also solidified his sexual orientation as bisexual or pansexual, hearkening back to when he was eight when he noticed a girl and thought “oh, she’s cute.” At the time, he was confused, wondering “is this normal?” But then a friend introduced him to the LGBTQ+ community, and he realized “oh, that’s cool” and that he was “bisexual.” M--- misses his friend since she moved, and misses hugging his friends because “when you hug someone, you feel comfortable with them” and “they’re comforting you.”

J--- dated a girl a year or two ago - “we’re not together anymore” - and they posted about it on Snapchat, forgetting that their aunt could see their Snaps. Their aunt told their mom and their grandmother that they were a lesbian. Their grandmother threatened that J---’s uncle would check their phone and phone bill, and potentially take the phone away - or “hammer it” as happened to J---’s similarly-aged cousin’s phone when her queerness was discovered - but because J---’s uncle is “pretty accepting of LGBTQ,” he did not follow through. Out of fear of some form of punishment, J--- then spent months convincing their grandmother that “I did not like girls”; though they were able to come out to their mom and two cousins, who are all “fine” with it. They have not yet come out to their father. Though they plan to do so, J--- mentions that their father “thinks you

decide” about your sexuality, and that “it would take him a while” to come around to it. They have decided to wait “until I’m older” to talk to their father about this, because they “need a father figure.”

L---- “found out” that she was bisexual in fifth grade, when she noticed herself continuously thinking about her best friend. At first, she wondered “is this normal?” Then she began hearing more about identity, and about sexual orientations, and she realized “this has to do with that.” Now, she has come to feel that “it’s okay to identify” as “whatever you want.” She insists “don’t let nobody tell you” who you are or that you should not be yourself. In a zine published by the Pride Club in 2020, L---- had some haiku poems, including:

I like both genders

We bisexuals exist

Hey - stop ignoring us all.

Despite her comfort in her identities, anxieties about being out (or outed) persist for L----. One time, when her family was going to pray - “which I didn’t want to” do - her uncle asked her “Why do you like women?” in front of her grandmother. L---- was scared that her grandmother might have overheard and would disapprove, so she deflected the conversation. Later on, when a different family member mentioned that L---- “liked women,” her grandmother shouted and L---- had to claim “it was a joke” and find an excuse.

In our third session, M---- answered the question that they had declined to answer in the first session, about their parents. Earlier, they didn't want to tell me "because I wasn't really comfortable, but now I'm comfortable." In this span of time, they had told their mother that they were "gender fluid" and that "I feel like both a woman and a man," and their mother was "weirded out." While their mother supports them in being attracted to boys and girls, she "didn't support" M----'s gender identity. M---- expressed disappointment but compassion, saying "she's uncomfortable" because "she hasn't met anyone who are trans" and "she hasn't seen LGBTQ in her entire life," so it is "probably awkward for her."

J---- went to an elementary school in Washington Heights, the same school that her grandmother had sent her mother and uncle to when they were growing up. The school immediately makes J---- think of Whiteness because there was "one woman who was Black" but "everyone else was White or White-toned, but of Hispanic origins." There were "at maximum four Teachers of Color," and in general J---- found that teachers were interested primarily in helping "the White kids"; her sense was that they left Students of Color like her - "obviously, I'm not White" - to "learn on your own."

One White teacher whom J---- had in fifth grade made her help out two students "who were special needs," one who was White and the other who was "Hispanic, and a bit darker than me." J---- did not understand why she was asked to help them, especially because she felt confused in the class herself. But the White student "was aggressive,"

and would hit and scratch her but the teacher “wouldn’t say anything.” Later on, the same White teacher told her to go help the kids downstairs in the daycare, and J---- would end up washing their laundry, cleaning up their puke, and more. J---- was confused, being very young, and “didn’t know” that it was wrong for a teacher to make her do that, but she did sense something was “off” - after all, she thought “I’m basically doing [the teacher’s] job, for free.” On a day when there was a pungent odor emanating in the classroom, the teacher only sprayed air freshener “around the Kids of Color,” clearly “thinking it was them” who smelled. At fifth grade Parent-Teacher Conferences, when she spoke in Spanish J----’s grandmother was told by a White teacher “I don’t understand you, go to a person who understands.” This was the tipping point for J----’s grandmother, who had “never noticed” the racism and Whiteness of the school before, J---- infers because J----’s uncle and mother have “White skin color” and had different experiences there than she did. But she felt it the entire time, noting that if you were darker-skinned teachers would “look at you different”; she could offer an answer in class to which a teacher would respond “no, you’re wrong,” but then “a kid who is White would say it” and the teacher would reply “yes, you’re right.”

J---- immediately and validly suspected racist and sexist bias on her fifth grade teacher’s part. It does not matter what J----’s teacher’s intention was; their impact was horribly harmful. And as part of my personal ongoing work especially as a White educator, instead of leaping to distance myself from the teacher, I need to seek out the part of that teacher that resides within myself in order to weed it out. The part of me that is similar to that teacher has existed forever within me, and it has deep roots. This includes the part of me that, for just a moment, considers wondering “Did the teacher intend something else?” This wondering is not simply a product of the pressures to privilege-bond with and take the sides of other folks in similar positioning to myself. It comes directly from a personal experience I had in fifth grade.

My fifth grade teacher asked me to regularly help out another student in the school. He was one year younger than me and was classified with both a learning disability and with emotional disturbance (which were made clear to me) and had a very hard time making friends. He was also a Black, foster child in an almost entirely White class. It was emphasized to me that I was being asked to work with him because of some of my strengths and attributes - including compassion and patience.

I see many incredible attributes in J---, and when remembering my personal fifth grade experience, for just an instant I consider the question “could J---’s teacher have intended the same thing for J---, out of a recognition of these strong qualities?” Then, somewhat horrified by my own mind, I recognize: At no point was fifth grade Me asked to clean up after anyone else. The dynamic between myself and the student I had been asked to help did not trigger stereotype threat for me, nor did I once even consider the possibility that the assignment had to do with a negative view of my race. I thought he and I developed a friendship - but how did he feel about it? How might our dynamic have triggered him, especially given my certain inability to recognize or name power dynamics or race?

Most importantly: As an educator now, can I recognize how my fifth grade experience was so vastly, tremendously different from J---’s? Can I understand why I must not impose this personal experience, or the emotions evoked in my memory of it, upon J---’s experience?

I wonder how many educators have put J--- in positions like this one she described in fifth grade. Then, I wonder if I have done this to her. In fact, I did ask J--- to attend a recent LGBTQ+ meeting because I valued her leadership and presence, and I stated as much. J--- came, and when asked what brought her to the meeting, she said “Scott.” Did she perceive this as me forcing her into something she did not want to do? Or was it an important gesture that helped her to overcome fears or anxieties? Does the difference, if there is one, lie in the trust I have built with her, how I framed the request, or something else?

Questions generated: As an educator, what data do I choose to collect or look at to gauge the alignment of my intentions versus my impact on students? What data am I consciously or unconsciously ignoring to preserve a fixed narrative about myself, at the expense of students? How do I prioritize and ensure that I receive honest, authentic, and regular (ongoing) feedback from our students about how they feel? Could I have more accurately or honestly gauged participants’ experiences of the sessions with me - and if so, how? Could I have better or more consistently named intersectional dynamics present in the group - including in my interactions with participants?

L---- says that she has never felt like she's experienced or perceived Whiteness in her experience in schools because she thinks most of her teachers "just saw me as White or something." For her, avoiding being racially targeted in the way other participants have been translated into receiving treatment more like White people. She guesses that she was treated this way, despite her skin being as dark as other participants' and being visibly Latinx, because "I was small" and quiet, and assumed to be "innocent." Beyond these possibilities, she is unsure why.

When J---- has experienced Whiteness in classrooms led by Teachers of Color, they associate it with "low self-esteem" on the part of the teachers. These teachers were probably "raised thinking White people were better" and that "they have to lower themselves down." J---- immediately shares an example of a Hispanic teacher they had in First Grade. A lighter-skinned boy sitting next to J---- used to try to talk to J---- during class often - which "the whole class saw." In response, the teacher "screams at me," assuming that J---- was responsible, "put me on Level Red," and "left me in the classroom alone" while the rest of the class went out for recess.

I wonder about the influence of L's learning disability and learning style on how she has been treated by teachers. Does her quietness, which stems not from being shy but from the need for ample processing time before speaking, mean that she often "flies under the radar" in classrooms, or is overlooked - due to teachers' focus either on more vocal and verbal students (dismissing or underestimating her because of her learning disability) or, in the case of predominantly Black and Brown classrooms, on students they have profiled as having "behavioral issues" (assuming that she is fine while targeting others)?

This experience at a previous school illuminates that punishment-based consequences (like behavior charts where "Level Red" means punishments) can lead to injustice and can have many negative side effects, particularly from a student vantage point. Instead of deepening a collective understanding of what

happened and their connection to broader systems of oppression in order to learn and prevent similar situations from occurring, a punishment-based approach focuses on identifying a singular perpetrator and often a singular victim. More restorative approaches to discipline, like the one my school adopts and trains all of our staff in implementing, focus on opening dialogue and hearing full stories, encouraging self-reflection and problem-solving, and identifying specific social and emotional skills that the people involved can practice and work on.

Even our school's approach, though, like any tool, can be utilized in a way that reinforces an oppressive, compliance-oriented status quo; one-on-one restorative conversations can quickly become oriented towards students learning to do what a teacher wants them to do differently in their classroom rather than fostering a skill that the student will be able to apply in any situation in their life moving forward. The best intended system can revert to sending a horribly damaging "you are a bad person" or "your value to our community depends on your compliance" message that undermines the project of abolitionism. The way in which punishment-based experiences linger and fester, emotionally and psychologically - without having done a thing to teach or grow someone - and the direct connections among detentions, suspensions, and incarceration illustrate that we have no choice but to both pursue alternatives and always check the role that biases play in whatever we are attempting to do.

Speaking in generalities is easier than looking inward about this. The next question, turning to interrogate my part of the mess, must be: How am I similar to this teacher? When have I wielded punishment in this way, or similar ways?

I quickly think of a recent example, of a Black student whom I authorized last year to be separated from his class to conduct his work on his own in the guidance office for several days. I did so even though I know I do not believe in detention or suspension, or that removing students is an effective strategy - and while this was neither an official detention or suspension nor caught up in official records or reports, it functioned similarly. It designated (and scapegoated) this student as a unique, singular problem to be weeded out of the class, rather than simply a reflection of his conditions. His teachers found his behaviors challenging - I refuse to use the loaded term "misbehaviors" when I know that they were not deliberate, targeted, or even conscious on the part of this student, and I believe that he, like all students, came to school wanting to succeed. While we tried various different responses to these behaviors, the decision to remove him had little to do with him and more to do with myself and my colleagues not knowing what to do to help this student, how to handle our impatience when plans were disrupted or thrown off-track, and trying to maintain a sense of control to handle the fears that we projected onto other students in the class. It was a horrible reason to do a violent thing, and neither the student nor the class community recovered from the fracture.

Questions generated: When do I have the desire to punish students, and where does that desire actually come from? What does it look like to relinquish power and control while maintaining a safe community environment for all students? How do I practice responding to the behaviors of others (both students and adults) that challenge me by opening my mind to multiple narratives, asking questions, and listening? How do I catch myself when I am inclined to jump to a conclusion about a perpetrator, victim, and harm done at first glance, based on what I (thought I) saw in one isolated moment? How much more learning can be present when I am able to give everyone in my community grace, most especially when conflict or harm occurs?

During the lesson we visited together, J----'s and L----'s class was writing introduction paragraphs for essays telling the stories of immigrants whom students had chosen to interview. J---- thought of Whiteness during a teacher's model of a sample introduction paragraph, the content of which was focused the objectives of the Black Lives Matter movement: "When they were talking about BLM, and what [BLM] wanted to do," J---- thought of Whiteness a little bit, but then thought "more about colored people" who wanted to "find a better life," including those who were "trying to move to the United States." The lesson centered on the stories of immigrants and People of Color, so J---- did not see Whiteness much within it or feel a presence of Whiteness in the room "other than some White people." They described what they felt in the lesson, which they did not associate with Whiteness, as "people trying to encourage people," students and teachers talking about immigrants' stories, and fundamentally trying to "open peoples' eyes" and establish that "it's okay to not be White" and "to go through things."

During the lesson we visited together, L---- mostly saw examples of immigrants and asylum seekers, most of whom were People of Color - "well, except for [one White teacher's] grandfather." Whiteness did not significantly impact the lesson, which L----

described as “peaceful.” Students were working on their written essays capturing the stories of an immigrant whom they had interviewed. L---- was writing about one of the current teachers in the school, who had immigrated from a country in Western Africa to the United States as a young person. As she worked on putting the teacher’s story to writing, L---- saw and felt Whiteness because the teacher had been harassed by her peers once in the United States, who had said “offensive things... mocking to African Americans.” L---- felt “really bad” for this teacher, saying that “back then, people were colorblind” and “didn’t see many Black people,” or at least they were “more used to White people.” (L---- made the assumption that the students who had harassed the teacher were White.) L---- said that it “felt good” that her teacher “was brave enough to share” this story with her.

J---- perceived Whiteness in the lesson we visited together when students were working on their immigration stories, and specifically when one teacher shared a model for an introduction paragraph about his grandfather, who fled the Nazis during World War II and the Holocaust and immigrated to the United States. She connected the flight from oppression, the fight for justice, and the experience of targeted violence with People of Color and not with Whiteness, and she associated the oppressive forces they were fleeing with Whiteness - which led us to a longer conversation about Judaism and Jewish identity. This connected the teacher’s story about his grandfather to what J---- has heard about Jewish people in her life outside of school. Her grandmother has often said “Jewish people either have a lot of money or they like a lot of money,” a stereotype that J---- thinks comes from her grandmother’s own experiences. She associates Jewish people and

Whiteness with money and insists that anyone her children or grandchildren marry or date “have to be White or Jewish” or else she will not “let you live in my house.” J---- strongly disapproves of this but is able to trace where it comes from in her grandmother: Growing up with no money, her grandmother strove to not have to worry about basic survival. J---- further explains that particularly being light-skinned - “she’s not really dark” - it “sunk in” long ago for her grandmother that “White people are better” and also that White people offer opportunities, power, and money that People of Color cannot, especially those closer to Blackness.

J---- was surprised to learn that their White teacher was also Jewish, having envisioned Jewish people as all being People of Color based on what they knew about their experiences and identities. Participants had many questions and misconceptions about Judaism and Jewish identity, in response to which I did offer a few basic pieces of information. When J---- explained their grandmother’s comments about Jewish people, I considered naming the anti-Semitism embedded in the statement; instead, I opted to maintain an inquiry lens, saying “Interesting. Where do you think that stereotype comes from for your grandmother?” This gave J---- the benefit of the doubt that they already recognized that their grandmother’s statement was problematic (if not exactly why). I feared that I should have more directly addressed the negative stereotype, but the inquiry approach enabled J---- to surface what they understood about the issue at hand, and to make their own connections between the histories shared by their teacher and their grandmother’s comments. Lastly, the inquiry approach enabled me to avoid what could be perceived as a judgment or condemnation of J----’s grandmother and to maintain the reflectiveness of the space without simply letting the anti-Semitic comment slide (instead, trusting that with the right questions, students will not only understand but be able to articulate the problem themselves). That always sticks more powerfully.

For their Humanities essay, J---- had chosen to write their grandmother’s immigration story, offering a direct connection between J----’s life and family and their learning in the classroom.

Teachers’ identities matter, and how teachers authentically and self-reflectively embody their identities in the space of the classroom and with students matters.

Questions generated: What is the impact of two out of the four teachers on this team being immigrants themselves, and offering to be interviewed by students about their personal immigration experiences for their essays (along with the option of interviewing a family member or someone else they know)? What was the impact of three out of the four teachers on this team being Black and/or Latinx? What is the impact of one of the teachers being White and sharing the story of his Jewish grandfather?

J---- does not find a lot of Whiteness in classrooms “in this school,” and names that in this school “they pride the fact that” Whiteness is not centered here. She also notices that there is “not a majority of White people” in terms of adults in the school, and that in general nobody talks “about Black people in a bad way.” J---- has had two experiences in middle school where she felt she couldn’t learn. The first, which she states was “not because of the teacher,” was with a table of boys in her class who were “really loud” and who would laugh a lot in class. J---- said “I don’t like loud noises,” and so this group of boys would “make me nervous” and “awkward”; she ended up distracted and thinking about that group and falling behind in class. The second involved a White teacher. J---- explains that she “used to write tiny” because she “didn’t like my writing.” One day in class, this teacher “took out his phone and zoomed in” on her writing, and commented “wow, that’s small!” - and even though she knew their intention was to be friendly and fun, she found it “embarrassing” for this already self-conscious attribute to be highlighted publicly.

M---- describes a liberating and affirming classroom as “neat” and “clean.” They identify their current readings in Humanities as along the lines of what they would want to read, as they are interested in learning about “histories” and “racism.” As they describe themselves as having both “social anxiety” and “ADHD,” they envision themselves

fidgeting and paying attention in any classroom space, but they “don’t really talk that much in the classroom” and therefore say they claimed to not have specific recommendations for teachers. M---- does, however, have a clear model of what his ideal teacher would do and be like, as he would like one of his current teachers to be in his liberating classroom with him (along with “other students I don’t know”). M---- only feels like he can really learn in one of his classrooms, with this specific teacher, who is White. This teacher “makes it fun” for students, “cheers us up,” and “never lets us down.” The teacher stays with M---- to help him “do everything I need help with,” and M---- is confident that this teacher “will understand me” and “help me out.” M---- feels that all parts of his identity are affirmed by this teacher.

J----’s story gives me pause, as it must. When do I do things like this inadvertently, to students and to adults on staff?

The teacher M---- refers to as the only teacher they can learn from is White, and this teacher referred M---- to me earlier in this school year after M---- came out to the teacher about being non-binary, going by “they,” and wanting to change their name. After this teacher reached out to me, I Google chatted with M---- to share about my identity, to let them know there are other non-binary and transgender students in the building, and to discuss ways we can support (including our gender-neutral bathroom and changing the name on M----’s school email account). I got M----’s permission to email the staff to ensure that they all use their correct name, email address, and pronouns and re-introduce M---- to the class. In the meantime, this teacher has gone above and beyond to support M---- in all ways, including when it comes to their anxiety. One evening long after school ended, the teacher remained on a Google chat video call with M---- to talk through a scary experience they had with a mentally ill person in their building. Interestingly enough, this same teacher is the one whom J---- mentioned embarrassed them in front of the class that one time, which reminds me that anti-racism, especially for those of us who are White, is not a fixed identity but an action at any given moment in time; and it is not linear, and involves continuously collecting various forms of data to gauge how we are impacting students. No teacher is just one thing at all times and to all students, so we must always examine our enactment of Muhammad’s (2020) HRL framework.

Questions generated: What should be named publicly in a classroom, and what shouldn't be? How do I determine whether I harmed students? Do these answers change from individual student to individual student? Where do students' voices live in determining this? How do I create spaces where students feel free and encouraged in telling us when we have made a mistake?

L---- describes a liberating and affirming lesson as incorporating some of what is currently happening in her classrooms - including “immigrant stories,” “journeys to America,” and “their experiences in the United States.” To support her and affirm her intersectional identities, she would like teachers to make “people understand more” - which involves the lessons being “less harder,” “extensions” for projects and work, and “less noise.” L---- learns best in a calm and quiet environment, which she named the classroom we visited to be. Additionally, while L---- enjoys reading and learning about “immigration stuff,” she would like to read “horror novels” sometimes and engage in lessons “on other religions” as well as even more lessons on “acceptance.”

L----'s interest in horror and note that this is not something that currently happens in our school, makes me think about more opportunities for student choice, and the power of choice when it comes to middle school independent reading (Beers & Probst, 2017).

Questions generated: Where can independent reading and student book choice fit within the HRL framework; how could we leverage this to foster students' identities, for example? What ranges of book genres, styles, topics, authors, and levels do we have in our classroom libraries and in our building library? Do we have horror books by and featuring People of Color, queer people, and more? How can we use Zaretta Hammond's work to conduct an inventory of texts in our curriculum and those available in our libraries?

L---- had a difficult time answering some of my questions about race and Whiteness right away, and she said “I do not understand the question” several times when I first asked her to envision a liberating and affirming Humanities lesson. In her story earlier, about attempting to educate her uncle but having difficulty finding the words, and in other moments throughout, I sensed that L----'s learning disability impacted her, but she did not name or mention it in any way. I debated at several points whether or not to mention it, but since she had not

brought it up, I decided not to name it in the group space. I found myself asking numerous follow-up questions, offering examples, and paraphrasing what she said to clarify her thoughts in order to support L----. In some situations (including her story about attempting to educate her uncle), this seemed to potentially connect to what I know about her learning disability. I was able to see from transcripts of the conversations, later on, that I often asked quite rambling questions, or two questions at one time. When L---- asked for clarification and I broke the questions down one at a time, she was able to answer; and in situations where I was able to offer an example (like “one way my identities lead me to see something different is when I notice in classrooms that someone assumes that a boy is with a girl”). Once I successfully broke down the questions and offered a clear example, L---- was able to elaborate.

Question generated: Looking at which questions and models worked well for L----, how could I adapt this curriculum and process to anticipate students’ potential needs and ensure all students understand and have a voice?

J---- almost refuses to try to describe what a liberating and affirming lesson would look and feel like for their intersecting identities. They maintain that they “shouldn’t picture it” because it should be about “learning new things”; they are open to anybody being in the classroom and welcome “new people” and reading about anything. “If I try to picture it,” they insist, “it would not feel liberating” and would be tantamount to “closing myself in a closet with people that I just feel comfortable with.” Getting to know new people and perspectives “could be liberating.” When asked if Whiteness exists in this ideal space, J-- clarifies that White people are welcome, but not beliefs or mindsets that put White people “above other students” or people. They say that their intersecting identities have likely led them to want new experiences, though they note that before our small group discussions for this study, they “probably wouldn’t have.”

J---- specifies that while they do not mind talking about race, it can be “stressful” and “bring people down” to read and learn about, because “people say things not noticing”

their impact. As an example, they offer that when people say “White people did this or that,” and there is a White person in the room, they wonder about how the White person is feeling. J---- would not make recommendations to teachers, because “not knowing” is what “makes the lesson” interesting and powerful. They trust all of their teachers - at least their current teachers - to “know their students well” and understand how they can be pushed to grow. Additionally, noticing that all three student participants said “I don’t know” to questions about a liberating and affirming lesson, J---- explains that there is “no such thing as a perfect lesson” and “it’s hard to make something perfect” - the goal, they establish, is to “keep learning more about yourself.” L--- added to J---’s comments, saying that you can learn anywhere, especially “life lessons,” like “mistakes.”

I initially wanted to tell J---- not to worry about the White people in the classroom; I was about to speak for myself, as I had done before, and illustrate that we White people need to be able to recognize our positioning, our privilege, and our part(s) in White supremacy without being fragile. This impulse came from my potentially knee-jerk assumption that J---- was sharing this concern for my benefit, or because of me, as the White person in the immediate conversation. Quickly, though, I realized it likely wasn’t, based on the previous three sessions during which I had spoken about Whiteness and myself in a way that generalized Whiteness and White supremacy and deliberately laid the groundwork for this. The very fact that Students of Color would worry about what White individuals are thinking or feeling is a testament to the power of Whiteness and White fragility. Was there more to J----’s concern about talking about race too much in the classroom? Though they mentioned that they don’t mind learning about it, they did mention it could be a lot. For themselves, too? I did not get the opportunity to ask that.

Questions generated: When centering anti-racism and racial justice in the classroom, how can we name the power and impact of Whiteness on even how I (or we) think and talk about race in that space? (E.g. worrying about White people’s feelings or reactions.) How could I frame these conversations to avoid or reflect on this anxiety? How can I foreground or anticipate some of these concerns, and proactively mediate them - or provide students with space to process and parse them out early on? How can I ensure that learning about race, racial injustice, and anti-racism does not become an emotional dump or drain on

Students of Color? (I'm thinking here of strategies like centering resistance, culture, and joy and not simply tragedy and oppression.)

Participants all had a hard time envisioning a liberating or affirming lesson, as J--- noticed. Why was this? Was it because the current pedagogy they have experienced in the school, which intends to be empowering and affirming, is succeeding - and participants implicitly trust their current teachers to know what to do? Was it because they have not been encouraged or taught to think so broadly or freedom dream before, especially in school? Is it because of limited background knowledge needed to do such visualizing? To what extent does participants' struggle with this type of envisioning stem from their trust in their current teachers and an acute self-awareness about their own limitations, particularly because of their ages? (After all, they consistently were able to name what they did not want and need.) What does this mean for our curriculum planning and instruction? What do we need to do differently, more of, or in addition to?

Questions generated: What is the ideal balance between attending to what students say or think that they want or need in the classroom as children and what adults with similar intersecting identities look back and wish they had had? To what extent is that question inherently ageist? How much perspective is important in making instructional decisions, and does that perspective necessarily come from or change with age? How can we build students' comfort and skills in freedom dreaming and proactively offer them space to do this abolitionist and transformative vision-building? To what extent are abolitionist, restorative, and culturally responsive pedagogies responsive to who students are in the present moment, and to what extent do (or must) they respond to the plethora of possibilities of who students will be, intersectionality, in the future?

When she considers her own intersecting identities, J---- confidently states that people with different identities than her own would not have the same perspective - on anything, including Whiteness in the classroom. Others “wouldn’t understand the same way,” she says, noting that even for “allies” it “won’t be the exact same” as having the first-hand experiences of racism and “homophobic slurs.” And no matter how much they might support, without those experiences they “won’t see it the same.” People with different intersecting identities from hers would also not have the same idea of a liberating or affirming lesson. They probably wouldn’t have “things in common” in the classroom. L--

- and M--- both agreed that their intersecting identities resulted in “different opinions” (as L--- phrased it) about what a liberating and affirming lesson might be.

At first, L---- had trouble answering whether her intersecting identities influence how she sees race and Whiteness in the world and the classroom. After revisiting her identities - cisgender, Hispanic, bisexual, atheist - she is able to definitively state that she sees just about everything differently than people with other identities. On a basic level, she points out, some people - especially those not LGBTQ+-identified themselves - “are homophobic.” Even thinking about her family, she names differences in how she sees race, Whiteness, and identity due to her positioning. L---- describes her family as “intoxicated with the belief of God as White,” when she insists that Jesus was actually Black. (She told her uncle as much, and he insisted that Jesus had long hair and White skin.) L---- also described her family as “intoxicated with Whiteness” and “intoxicated” with the belief that “men love women, women love men.” She is able to see in a different way, though, because of her identities. L---- finds hypocrisy in her family’s claim to “accept LGBTQ” when they also send the message “if you are in the family member bloodline” and are LGBTQ+ then you are “not accepted.”

Vertical Axis: Tracing Whiteness Across Scales

M---- has already experienced a significant religious and spiritual journey. As he describes it, up until 2020, he was “busy with social media” and “helping only myself”;

but then “I was saved” because “I turned back to God.” He has shifted his social media towards his faith that “God is going to come,” and now finds himself in a place where he is “more interested in Him” than other kids his age. It is “scary on this earth,” and M---- expresses sadness that people are “turning their back on God” by turning to Satan (who himself “was once an angel” before betraying God, which M---- hates). He actively attempts to teach everyone in his life, including friends and siblings, to “turn to God before it’s too late”; even in his classroom “on Zoom this morning, I was saying ‘repent right now,’ ‘God is about to come, this year for the second coming’.” M---- wants to “save lost souls” so they are not “stuck in the Rapture,” where they will have no second chance and be suffering, “yelling for help,” and “sexually harassed” forever. He would like everyone to end up in Heaven, which has “gold paths,” “rainbows,” and “friendly animals” and is far safer than this earth, where there is so much evil including “many people that are sexually harassed.” M---- acknowledges that for him it is “hard being a Christian” and to find “His right path,” but that he is “trying to get a Bible” and to pray. He says that he does not really know if God wants him to be bisexual and transgender, and he knows that some churches claim that God does not want people to be LGBTQ+. But he maintains that to be accepted by God, he needs to “spread the gospel more” and “fix the Earth right now” - which involves putting an end to “the un-positive things, like racism and homophobia.” After all, he has been both Christian and has been “supporting LGBTQ” for his entire life; even when he was little and “didn’t understand the LGBTQ much,” he was “still supportive of who they are.”

In our first full session together, M---- had asked me when I became Christian. I had answered with a lens towards change and independence, asserting that I had attended church because of my family but by high school had stopped attending

and am still in a process of self-determination in terms of religion. I did not inquire about M----'s curiosity, and when this information emerged later on, I reflected on that question he had posed with a new set of questions. I felt a bit of concern as M---- spoke about Satan, hell, and the Rapture - in large part because the LGBTQ+ people I know who grew up believing in that had to overcome tremendous self-loathing and internalized hatred and break away from their churches and in many cases their families forever in order to live as who they are. M---- surprised me, not only in his insistence that what God wants from him is acceptance and eradication of racist and homophobic hate, but also in how important a vector religion was for him in eventually expressing more about other aspects of his intersectional identities. I am very glad that did not limit our early conversations about intersectionality and identities to race, gender, and sexuality. I chose to explicitly model the story of religion as well as many other parts of my identity in our initial session together, and kept the scope expansive; true to the transversal axis of comparative case study, one never knows (especially across lines of difference) what elements of our identities intersect and connect to each other in important ways. Though religion, for example, is sometimes an afterthought for me in terms of my intersecting identities, our conversations in this study unearthed much more than I had previously recognized in terms of ways my religious experiences have shaped me and how I think about and see the world around me. Also, for M---- in particular religion helped him eventually express more depth in his story about his racial identity and his family.

Questions generated: How did my explicit inclusion of numerous different vectors of identity support a more nuanced, complex, and profound process? What did I not model or include that I could or should have, and what limitations did my omissions cause?

In our first session together, J---- was the first participant who posed a question to me about my story of my identities and histories, asking "Did you immediately come out to your parents about it, or did you wait?" and then "How do they feel about it now?" These questions echoed the anxieties all three participants have around coming out, being outed, and family acceptance. I shared some of my experiences coming out as queer in high school and then as transgender later on, and I identified with the pressure to be secretive and the fears of others finding out (which I used as an example of a not liberating space, where you can't be truly yourself). I was wary of my story becoming or being perceived as the rule, or even a possibility - given that so much has gotten better for me, and I cannot determine how much of that relates to my privileges.

Throughout, it struck me that all three participants have far more different points of tension with their own families than I did at that same age. For all three of them, there are aspects of tension around not only LGBTQ+ identity, but around religion and around race, as well. While I did eventually start engaging in conversations about race with my family, due to my Whiteness and privileged positioning (certainly not because racism and anti-Blackness weren't pervasive in

myself and my life growing up) that truly did not happen until much later in my life. These three participants are by necessity actively tackling anti-Blackness in themselves and their families, attempting to develop their own religious and faith identities, and navigating the daunting path of coming out. This is another illustration of intersectionality and a testament to its absolute importance.

Questions generated: To what extent is my personal experience helpful and hopeful for students, and to what extent is it misleading if decontextualized or oversimplified? How can learning about and hearing the full stories of students help me gain perspective about areas of convergence and divergence among us? How can intersectionality be mapped not only as identities and identity markers, or as oppressions experienced, or as ways of seeing, but also as points of tension with those we love and with those we see as our own communities?

Questions generated: What can I (or must I) do or think differently to fully value and leverage the tremendous extent to which students learn from and with their families? How could the tensions between students and their families, if acknowledged and processed as a community, strengthen family-school partnerships?

As J---- followed the accusations of sexual harassment against Governor Andrew Cuomo via social media, their cousin asserted “she’s lying, he has money” and “with that much money, I would have let him.” J---- found this upsetting, noting that “it’s more than one person saying it happened,” and L--- nodded, confirming that he was accused of “assaulting other girls.” J---- found their cousin “insensitive” for making these statements “when it didn’t happen to her.”

J---- explained that they had followed the story of Jeffrey Epstein via social media, and that it “made me think of Whiteness” because, despite being caught red-handed, Epstein went to trial and pled not guilty. If he had been “a Black person,” J---- is confident “they would have just killed him.” J----’s understanding of the details around Epstein’s crimes and trial are fuzzy with some inaccuracies, but their foundational understanding of Epstein’s story is spot-on: Many public excuses were made for Epstein (and by numerous

former cronies) and his Whiteness offered a layer of protection that is often denied to People of Color, and especially Black people, in the United States. People “wanted justice” and it “wasn’t given”; according to J---, Epstein’s suicide to avoid serving a sentence was another way for him to exert control - and Whiteness. L--- added that “Trump participated in all of that stuff,” and that “Anonymous exposed it.”

Participants could not recall Cuomo’s name at first, referring to him as “a government guy” before we deduced it together. They also could not name Jeffrey Epstein until I was able to piece together “rapist” and “prince” and identify Epstein through this connection. At many times throughout our conversations, social media and online media came up as hugely significant forces in participants’ lives - particularly when it comes to understanding the world at a larger scale than their everyday lives. Participants were particularly able to bring social media examples to the table in the second session, which was a photo elicitation that I expanded to include sources participants found or had seen on the internet. The examples brought by participants to the table illustrate that they are already engaging in almost constant absorption and (often) critical analysis of social media on a daily basis.

Questions generated: How could curricula, the HRL framework, and all of us generally leverage students’ engagement with social media more effectively and more regularly? When are students analyzing articles and posts just as they encounter them on the Internet to practice navigating these texts outside of the school building? (To what extent does this or does it not require a mindset shift away from standards-based content coverage?) How could a structure like this curriculum-as-study, and particularly the spaces where students generate art or identify images, videos, memes, or more that resonate for them, be utilized more consistently to engage students in relevant and HRL-aligned thinking and critical analysis?

J--- directly compares former President Donald Trump to Jeffrey Epstein because of the power conferred by Whiteness. She notes that people who are not White “can have power,” but “most people who are White are born into power” and are spared racism like “some schools not wanting kids like” them. Fundamentally, she knows it is “harder for a person of color to have power than it would be for someone who’s not of color” because

for White people “it just slides.” When president, Donald Trump “praised people for the racist things they did,” and even when Black people were being killed “he would talk down on them.” L--- added that Trump “called the BLM protesters ‘thugs’.” J---- wondered how “they allowed him to be president for so long.” But she already knows why: “Because he had power,” and “power matters more.” As the president, he “can always have power” and people will “still believe in him” - which J---- finds ludicrous. After all, she questions “how could you praise a man who talks down on People of Color?”

When L---- is first asked to think of Whiteness, she describes “a blank page” that is purely White. On her laptop, L---- pulls up a YouTube video of an incident that reminded her of daily experiences with Whiteness. The video features a White woman on a New York City subway train, shouting “the f-word” and racial slurs at an “Asian or Hispanic woman,” and then “hitting her with an umbrella” and “spitting at her.” This reminds her of a more personal, example of a regular encounter with Whiteness that happened with her mother and her sister on the subway recently. After her mother had picked up her sister from school, “one little, racist White lady” started shouting at “aliens and immigrants” to leave and “go back to their country” - L---- noted that she meant “Hispanic people, everybody Mexican.” People started to leave and move away from this woman, who “even told a Black person” to get off the train, too. L---- says “it was a bad experience,” and that her mother told her sister and herself that the White lady was “just crazy” and not to listen to her. L---- thinks of that woman as embodying a particular type of Whiteness, widely referred to as “being a Karen.” L---- explains that when she thinks

of “a Karen,” she thinks of a White woman who refuses to wear a mask (during the COVID-19 pandemic) and supports “Trump 2020.” This embodiment of Whiteness also connects to what L---- has seen “happening since George Floyd” was killed, specifically in an escalation of blatant and public attacks: “People are beginning to be racist to others” in public, and acting like they do “not even have no humanity” - especially White people.

I chuckled when L---- said “Karen,” agreeing that it is a helpful descriptor when it comes to Whiteness. Throughout the sessions, I attempted to avoid centering myself and also to proactively name my own Whiteness and engage in critiques of White supremacy and White fragility. I discussed the myth of “race-blindness” and described that was my upbringing for the most part. And one time when I mentioned White people and initially said “they,” I corrected myself and said “no, I should say ‘we’ because I am a part of that group.”

Questions generated: Did I effectively name my Whiteness and positioning in a way that offered participants a clear and authentic way to engage with me and each other in the space? How do I know? Can I truly know?

In J----’s neighborhood in Washington Heights, they notice the correlation among “bills getting higher,” “more White people moving in,” and “colored people getting kicked out.” J---- and their grandmother do not get kicked out because their grandmother “is friends with people.” They first refer to their super as “White” but then say “or passing” and “with a White skin color” because he “does talk Spanish to my grandma.”

J---- watches “a lot of documentaries,” especially true crime cases - for “educational purposes,” they specify. They have noticed a trend they find infuriating, which is that every time the documentaries feature a White person “killing a Black person” or “doing

something homophobic,” it is blamed “on the person who died.” Even if there are two People of Color involved in the crime, they will “blame it on the darker person, still.”

M---- did not see race as an issue in school, or at least it was not named as such, until George Floyd’s death this past year, before they were at our school. Last spring, they were walking through Central Park with their father, and they saw a big protest for Black Lives Matter. At first they were confused, but they quickly noticed that there was no violence and the protesters were peaceful. They asked their father “can I please go?” and their father said no, because “maybe there will be a cop shooting.” After some begging, he allowed them to join the protest under his close watch. M---- describes their experience of “protesting for Black Lives Matter, too,” explaining “we had to say the names of Black people who have died like George Floyd,” and “then we had to do this [they raise their fist in the air].” Since then, M---- has been seeing much more social media about Black Lives matter and feels “bad for Black people” because of the violence. M---- characterizes the “many Black people” who are their friends as “interesting,” “funny,” and “caring,” and wonders “I just don’t know why people shoot them.” But they do suspect that anti-Blackness or the concept of Black people as threatening may come from “when you see something for the first time” and find it “obnoxious” (such as a skin color). M---- described it as like a dog who first sees a cat and “is trying to fight with it.”

M---- was reticent at times throughout the sessions, though less once we started meeting in person, and I found it difficult to read them. In moments like this one, I found myself primarily encouraging M---- to share in as much detail as they were comfortable. Knowing about their social anxieties, out of fear of overwhelming them or possibly shutting them down, I tended not to pose as many follow-up questions or to probe or prompt self-reflection. I do wish I could have posed at

least one follow-up question about their thinking about Black people and anti-Blackness here.

Question generated: What could or should that question have been?

One day, a man who works in J----'s building started following her, and she ran away from him when she saw him "pull out a knife." When she told her uncle, he responded with skepticism, saying: "Why would some man want to do that? Why wouldn't they do it to, like, a little pretty White girl?" J---- was "confused." Now, however, they see similar racist and misogynistic comments on social media, particularly Tik Tok, often to "excuse crimes" by asking questions like "why her, why not somebody else?" and "saying she wasn't pretty enough" or "commenting about the girl's body." L--- describes that Tik Tok in particular has a vein of racism, which she refers to as "Black Lives Matter, except the opposite." J---- confirms that race is a factor in who she sees designated as "pretty" - including "pretty enough" to experience sexual harassment and assault.

As I had felt many times throughout these sessions, I initially felt anger and sadness that our students experience attacks and disbelief like this and are already inundated with racist and sexist messaging like this. I notice a tendency in myself to assume that some elements of this are worsened or heightened due to social media; but I also must remind myself that these oppressions and problems certainly did not start with social media. The dependence on social media to engage with the world at a larger scale might be exacerbated - not only by the technology era but even more pronouncedly by the COVID-19 pandemic that has confined students (and all of us) to their screens almost all day for a year.

Questions generated: How can we explicitly teach critical skills with social media like this, and incorporate them into our curriculum? What is the connection to the HRL framework?

I deliberately pause myself to think deeply about my own experiences, and whether or not I sense them coming up at all when J---- shares this story. This is a pause I have learned to take over the last thirteen years, since I experienced being

falsely accused – an experience that, over time and work and community engagement, had the positive effect of opening my ability to be vulnerable and reflect not only on the impact of harms that I had done (at all points through my life) but also my personal experiences with being assaulted and abused and silent or reluctant to acknowledge it. Part of my process of acknowledging, speaking about, and beginning to heal from my shame and personal traumas involved learning how to name and parse out my personal triggers in conversations about harm - especially when they involve public accusations and social media. With the help of a community, I decided early on that I would refuse to become someone whose trauma informed how I saw the world - someone falsely accused who then doubted accusers, or someone who did not speak up about my own experiences who then harbored resentment towards those who name theirs. I am trying to break this (all too common) cycle by healing, which necessitates the painful act of challenging myself when these issues arise: Am I feeling resentment? Am I shutting off or distancing at this point in the conversation? Am I having flashbacks to my experiences of being attacked (physically and then with false narratives)? Am I doubting what this student is saying right now? I felt confident that the answer to these questions was a definitive “no” when listening and talking to participants, but I must ask them, anyway. This is one process I must continuously engage in, not only for my own sake but for my community’s - we are interdependent, and my healing is critical.

Questions generated: What do I need to do in my everyday life, and what support systems do I need to maintain or put in place, to sustain this continuous self-interrogation, self-reflection, and healing? How is this already built into this curriculum-as-study, and where could I make it more explicit? How did the process I engaged in prior to the curriculum (in Chapters 1-3) lay an important foundation for this process during the curriculum-as-study?

Conclusion

At the end of the first session, when I named my identities and asked about how it felt to have the conversation with me as a participant and facilitator, J---- said “I feel the same” (implied as anyone else), and that she “would eventually” share these things with “other people.”

L---- said that our time together is “not boring, it’s fun.” This process has made her think differently about race and People of Color, and about the fact that “some people who are White can be racist” while “some are not and are accepting.” Being in the small group for this study has made L---- “feel accepted in the school” and “feel much better identifying myself” and “my experiences with racism.”

Over the course of the study, J---- notes that “the more time I’ve spent here, the more I’ve taken myself into consideration.” They explain that they have had a tendency to focus on “how other people thought of me,” but that now “I don’t really care,” and “as long as I like myself, I am fine.” When reflecting on how it felt to have me, with all of my intersecting identities, as a fellow participant and facilitator, she says that it was “better” (than other people). Many other people, especially educators, “are straight or do not associate with LGBTQ” - which J---- considers “fine, because teachers can learn from students.” But it also means that “not many people... would understand like you do.”

When asked after the first session (Week 1) how they felt, M---- said “kind of nervous,” but that they were “a bit less nervous” now. In reflecting on working with me, given my intersecting identities, they said “it’s comfortable” (with a smiley face) and “it makes me feel safe with you guys.”

M---- does not think that people with different intersecting identities would want the same things from a lesson, since people with different identities might have different comfort levels with various topics and will certainly have different perspectives. This

study has not really changed anything particular in his thinking, but he asserts that it felt “positive” and “good” to be a part of.

These reflections, accumulated over the course of the study, provide some indicators that students felt the ability to be authentic and honest, and that the process had a positive impact on them. I continue to worry a bit about participants’ potential over-identification with me as a queer and transgender person; I wonder if our areas of divergence or difference were not clear enough, or if I did not do enough to combat the possible insidiousness of White supremacist ideas of what queer or transgender experiences should look like.

In a classroom space, I would have definitely utilized more protocols to structure the group discussion, to ensure equity of voice. In our sessions, J---- spoke far more than L---- and M----, but we met together on a flexible schedule, and I was present in the group to facilitate and ensure that everyone had the opportunity to speak. In a classroom space with many small groups discussing at the same time, I would utilize a structure to ensure that no student dominated a group that I was not a part of.

Question generated: How can I continue to create these spaces for these students, and others? How could I improve upon the space - what information or data could I gather to inform this, and how?

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

“If experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing, then it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence.”

-hooks, 1994, p.84

In the land widely referred to as the United States, Shalaby (2017) states that “[c]riminalizing troublemakers is our historic, cultural routine” (p. xviii). In considering this quote, we must recognize that the students branded as “troublemakers,” who across schools tend to be seen as disruptive and/or burdensome, are all too often located at the intersections of marginalized identities – particularly race, gender, sexuality, and ability (Griffith, 2019). Black girls have become one of the highest-growing populations of incarcerated youth (Muhammad, 2020, p. 39). On April 20th, 2021, on the same day former officer Derek Chauvin was convicted for the second-degree murder of George Floyd, a police officer in Ohio shot and killed Black, 16-year-old Ma’Khia Bryant in a scenario in which police have long proven capable of arresting White people alive (Joseph, 2021). In schools, criminalizing and punishment-based discipline, rather than restorative approaches, is too often leveraged most harshly against Black, queer girls and Black trans and gender expansive youth (Hudson & Braithwaite, 2017).

Schools and classrooms have long been part of the “interconnected machineries of violence” that are “built into the foundation of our nation” and disproportionately impact intersectionally marginalized youth both inside of school and outside, of whom “a precious few” are “granted the right to matter” (Shalaby, 2017, p. xvii). Love (2019)

names the role of schools and classrooms in this violence “the educational survival complex” (p. 89). Shalaby (2017) indicts our nation-wide education system and the American psyche at large for, in lieu of offering restorative approaches to students that would align with liberating instruction, blaming oppressed students – these “troublemakers” – for the deeply-rooted, systemic oppressions that these allegedly problematic behaviors or academic performances stem from.

The images of this constant violence “reside in their imaginations... crowding out more beautiful, more human possibilities,” and Shalaby (2017) insists, as do I, that schools be “fueled by the imperative to imagine and create a world in which there are no throwaway lives” (p.xviii). To insist upon restorative justice and liberation in our schools, we must refuse deficit-based assumptions about intersectionally marginalized students and instead, insist upon seeing and centering their unique wisdom and insights in our community. As explored in Chapter 2, the harm done to intersectionally marginalized students, and particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color is documented to be pervasive in education research and in schools (Michael, 2015; Thompson, 2015; Koonce, 2017). Culturally responsive or abolitionist pedagogies demand that educators deliberately internalize asset-based mindsets, and abolitionism demands the type of shift that Shalaby enacts - to see the students most often deemed “troublemakers” as the leaders that we all must heed (Shalaby, 2017; Muhammad, 2020, p. 41).

Rankine (2020) stated that “Whiteness is in the way of seeing” – and allowing Whiteness to remain this barrier, especially once one knows it is there, is not an option in the pursuit of abolitionist teaching for the students on whom all of our liberation depends. Instead, Whiteness must be named and revealed for what it is and does – to make space

for unencumbered freedom dreaming. There are no more important visionaries than those students located at intersections of marginalized identities. As Shalaby (2017) notes, children “are masters of imagination,” and because “designing classrooms in the image of freedom requires an extraordinary degree of imagination,” Shalaby herself enlisted four young children often labeled as “troublemakers” – and I collaborated with three queer, trans or gender expansive, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx middle school students - “to light our path toward a new vision” (p. xviii).

In my third year as Assistant Principal, a 6th grade student finds me in the hallway at the end of the day. He tells me he had to step outside one of his classrooms earlier, in the middle of class, because his anxiety was high. Apparently, there was a guest teacher doing something different than what he expected (his usual Science class), which came as a surprise to him. Surprises trigger his stress. Earlier in the school year, we talked about strategies to handle this stress, and I was able to share that I, too, have a hard time adjusting to unexpected changes in my daily routine. It is a skill I am still working on. It is a huge first step to be able to notice and name what feeling he is having. He quickly learned that it helps him to take a slow walk down the hallway and back, taking deep breaths, and when possible speaking with an adult he trusts. On this day’s walk, when I am able to accompany him for a couple of minutes before an instructional coaching meeting, the student tells me he will come to the LGBTQ+ and allies meeting we are having soon. He does not name anything specific about his identity but tells me all about the non-binary city council candidate he went out to support with his mother.

I have a momentary flashback through my long history of anxiety and depression. In fourth grade my anxiety prevented me from sleeping for months. In my middle school and early teenage years, I holed myself up in my room even when extended family visited, avoiding having to engage with anyone. In college, I rejected an invitation to a prestigious Secret Society because their entire recruitment process consisted of surprise after surprise – an anonymous invitation slipped under the door, a limousine picking me up late at night to drive me to an undisclosed location for an unknown amount of time, a tour of the “tomb” conducted entirely with a mask pulled over my eyes. It bothered me, and I bowed out - though I did not understand why until years later when I arrived at the level of self-awareness that my 6th grade student already has.

Unlike this student, I learned at some point early in my life to not name or acknowledge the anxiety. And, unlike this student, I was a White girl without a diagnosed learning disability, facing far less scrutiny and a far lower likelihood of being criminalized based on my behaviors. However, like this student, I learned to channel my anxieties into achievement – which only exacerbated the stress caused when something unexpected or surprising interrupts or disrupts my rigid plans. I still struggle with this.

I have spent time in many schools where the act of a student stepping outside in the middle of class without being able to articulate why would not be met with questions or loving curiosity – “Are you all right?” “Tell me what happened” – but with ultimatums or threats that would only magnify the root problem (anxiety). It makes me angry to think about a school in which this student would be punished or chastised for what is, ultimately, the beautiful and powerful skill of knowing his feelings and doing what he needed in the moment (harming nobody) to take care of them. I want students to be encouraged to know themselves, take care of themselves, and ask us for help. This school that I imagine and am working towards does not and will not exist without me, and without me doing the continuous work at the backbone of abolitionist teaching: Continuous self-examination, continuous narrative and reflection to understand my self (which is continuously in flux). This autoethnography is never-ending. The process is the product.

This research-creation, this study, composed of a transferable curriculum and autoethnography, has attempted to enact and embody the work it proposes is necessary for all educators to continuously do - and be done and undone by - in pursuit of abolitionist teaching and liberating literacy instruction for queer, TGE, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx students (and thereby for all students). The work as narrated in the previous chapters and here is not complete or comprehensive, nor will (or could) it ever be - **and** it is always already essential to do.

Narratives, organized around the three axes of comparative case study, formed the process as well as the product through this study. The analysis has been conducted through narrative, and through the generation of questions that could drive continued

Historically Responsive Literacy-aligned instruction. Through this process, these research questions were engaged and explored.

My primary research questions were:

- When and how do queer, TGE, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx middle school students perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction in their Humanities classrooms? How do these perceptions make them feel?
- How do their intersectional identities influence how, where, and when they perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction?
- What do the visions of this population for liberating literacy instruction look like?

My secondary research questions were:

- How can educators create a space conducive to students' development of their own intersectional identities, examination of Whiteness in literacy instruction, and freedom dreaming about liberatory literacy instruction?
- What deliberate steps can educators make to create this space in their development of curriculum?

The sub-questions that emerged through the study were:

- When and how did participants read Whiteness in me-as-researcher, in me-as-Assistant Principal, in the school, in the city, in the country, and in the world?
- How do queer, TGE, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx students perceive their dynamic with a White, queer, trans administrator and researcher?

- How do their intersectional identities inform how they read this dynamic?

My autoethnographic, personal narratives continue in this chapter. Those included in chapters 1, 2, and 3 were importantly crafted prior to the study, those in Chapter 4 were written during the study, and those included in this chapter (Chapter 5) were written after the study was complete.

Discussion: Curriculum-as-Method

The transferable curriculum-as-method implemented through this study in conjunction with a critical autoethnography through personal narratives before, during, and after the study, enabled a continuous naming, tracing, and examination of Whiteness throughout the project. Throughout, participants' perceptions of and definitions of Whiteness were accepted at face value, and this range of interpretations of Whiteness connect to grounding literature (explored in Chapter 2) that confirm that Whiteness can be an individual's racial identity, and it can also emerge as "color, culture, or consciousness" because of its hegemonic dominance on systemic, interpersonal, and internalized levels (Singleton, 2015; DiAngelo, 2018, p. 24). Whiteness, as illustrated throughout participants' narratives-as-results, can exist and maintain power even without any White people present. The process of naming, tracing, and examining Whiteness – both through participants' narratives generated in the curriculum and through my autoethnography - was directed by the following imperatives (also explored in Chapter 2), which are applicable for all educators and most especially for those of us who are White.

The methodology and theories behind this study align with the philosophy captured in the epigraph for this chapter, by the inimitable bell hooks (1994): Telling our own stories in the classroom has inherent instructional and literary value. This applies to both students and teachers, and in fact creates an imperative for educators, given our power positionings, to offer the vulnerability and complexity of our own stories precisely to create space in the classroom where storytelling is recognized as a powerful and important mode of literacy learning. The two processes-as-products of this study (narratives from student-participants resulting from this curriculum and narratives from myself as educator), were driven by intersectionality and also inherently carry roots in culturally responsive and abolitionist teaching.

This study was grounded in intersectionality theory and advocates for the more widespread use of truly intersectional approaches to students and each other. As Black feminists like Audre Lorde (1982) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) have long pronounced, none of us can be free until the most marginalized among us are free. The pursuit of liberation necessitates amplifying and cherishing the voices of those most harmed by these systems (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2020). In order to do this, Crenshaw (1989) argues we must refuse single-axis and multiple-axis frameworks of identity that perpetuate the erasure of intersectionally-marginalized identities and stories. We can leverage intersectionality to examine who is being left out of any narrative, and why (Blackburn & Smith, 2010, p. 632).

Due to the differential harm experienced by intersectionally marginalized students within schools, and due to the urgency of educators shifting towards asset-based mindsets about these students, intersectionality is the foundation upon which abolitionist teaching

and culturally responsive pedagogy are built. Intersectionality demands looking at differential harm and valuing the voices of those most impacted by it (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2020). Abolitionist teaching aims to dismantle the oppressive “educational survival complex” and the beliefs and actions that uphold it, and that requires a true embrace of the leadership and wisdom of the intersectionally marginalized students at most risk within it (Love, 2019, p. 89).

It is a social and ethical imperative that educators (of all children) strive to be abolitionist teachers (Love, 2019). In this pursuit, it is critical for us to know and validate students in the fullness of their intersectional identities, to avoid erasing or pressuring students to submerge any part of themselves at any time, to support students in a critical analysis of power and intersectional oppressions, and to foster joy and the brilliance of marginalized communities that has historically been omitted from educational narratives (Crenshaw, 1989; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020). For this reason, among others, including the long-standing connection between storytelling and culturally responsive pedagogy, this curriculum-as-method unit hinges on personal narrative (hooks, 1994; Hammond, 2015). Working towards intersectional racial justice and the abolition of harmful institutions of oppression (as abolitionist teachers aspire to do) requires a collective examination of the impact of hegemonic Whiteness inside and outside of the classroom space **and** the centering of imagination and freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2003; Michael, 2015; Singleton, 2015; Love, 2019; Rankine, 2020). Students must be given the opportunity, with their full intersectional selves, to engage in this freedom dreaming - and their visions for liberatory pedagogy must drive all that we do.

This unit of study or similar processes that educators might attempt to implement should occur very early in a school year, as the narratives and questions generated through this process will fuel possibilities for the remainder of the year. Aligned with the stated purpose above, the unit was designed using the Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework (Muhammad, 2020). HRL acknowledges the primacy of (hi)stories in the present-day fights for racial justice, liberation, and literacy; in the creation of this framework Muhammad (2020) centered the stories of Black literary societies tracing back to the early 1800s as inspiration for models of emancipatory literacy. This redoubles the curriculum's emphasis on narrative. The HRL framework emphasizes personal identity development, intellectualism, criticality, and joy as essential for liberatory literacy instruction.

The curriculum-as-method, crafted utilizing HRL and used to structure this study, is located in full in Appendix B. In Chapters 3 and 4, I described the ways in which my implementation of this curriculum in this particular study diverged from the curriculum itself, for reasons specific to this iteration. I have noted these areas of divergence as sub-points in Appendix B, while maintaining the curriculum as crafted, as I recommend it to be considered for use in different contexts and by different educators.

For educators considering implementing this curriculum in their own contexts, one consideration to bear in mind is that, depending on one's role in their school or district, the multiple loci of "literacy instruction" throughout the curriculum might differ. Arguably, there will never be an iteration of this curriculum where there is a singular place where literacy instruction occurs, particularly if we value the storytelling and learning that happens in various realms of participants' lives (e.g. in dialogue with family

members) under the umbrella of literacy instruction (which, through the framework of literacy in this project, I do). As an administrator who does not teach in my own classroom, in my central project of tracing participants' perceptions of Whiteness in literacy instruction (as a starting-off point for their visions of liberatory literacy instruction), "literacy instruction" occurred in the Humanities classrooms I visited with participants, in the curriculum-structured sessions I facilitated and participated in with them, in their interactions with social media and the Internet, in their interactions with family members and friends, and more. This is one additional reason the autoethnographic portion (particularly prior to implementing this curriculum) is critical – this curriculum will not, and should not, look the same or take the same shape across different contexts.

This also reinforces my selection of comparative case study, a methodology that embraces the unboundedness of categories, a definition of literacy as the social construction of knowledge, and an understanding of reading a text or phenomenon as active meaning-making.

In middle school and high school, I did not know any out queer or transgender adults. "Gay" was considered a slur, invoked to drum up fears that the two allegedly lesbian Physical Education teachers were looking at us in the locker room or that our sophomore Biology teacher would try to brush up against boys standing at their lab benches. I do remember one teacher, in seventh grade, having the class read and discuss a book about a boy whose best friend on his soccer team comes out as bisexual. I recall nothing else about it. At no point did I consider the book might have something to offer me, personally. I did not meet a non-binary or transgender person, to my knowledge, until the summer after high school, when I worked at the Vermont Teddy Bear Company giving tours to tourists and visitors. A non-binary person in one of my tour groups noticed me and invited me to lunch. I went, they asked me if I wanted to date them, and I confirmed I was queer but said no, confused at that time if I was attracted to them or wanted to be like them - or both. Having been introduced only to butch/femme dynamics, it had not occurred to me that one could be butch and possibly date anyone not femme.

Race was rarely discussed in my almost entirely White middle school and high school classrooms, outside of the occasional inclusion of a Black-authored classic: Black Boy by Richard Wright my sophomore year, Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston my junior year. I am simultaneously thankful and fearful that I have no recollection of the details of those classroom conversations - possibly because they were always had as a full class and therefore dominated by the teacher along with perhaps one or two students. The absence of race beyond generic statements like “racism is wrong,” and the namelessness of Whiteness and White supremacy, are glaring now that I consider the rest of my middle school and high school canon: To Kill a Mockingbird, Walt Whitman, and more. I distinctly remember almost never being truly challenged around race. As a sophomore in high school, I had written a series of political essays, one of which focused on the problem of “reverse racism” (which I can now assert does not exist). The same, White teacher who taught us Black Boy gave me extra credit and no memorable feedback on the essay.

To return to Claudia Rankine’s (2020) questions: How many narratives existed for Black people in my imaginary – during middle school, or during high school? How do the narratives I had then impact me now? Where do they live – within me somewhere? What happens to my previous mindsets, biases, and triggers as I grow and heal? In a hegemonic, White supremacist world, do they ever truly go away?

Recently, during a visit from author Tony Medina about his graphic novel I Am Alfonso Jones, one of my school’s few White students reached out to ask me “Can People of Color be racist?” We proceeded to chat for the next ten minutes about power and race. Is this student different from younger Me because of proximity to and immersion in Communities of Color, both in New York City and in our particular school? Or because of the proactiveness of her teachers and administrators, or her parents and family? Or because of social media and the Internet, and the increasing visibility of anti-racist movements and accessibility of bite-sized and bullet-pointed explanations of race and racism? All of the above? Or is this student not actually different from younger Me at all?

Discussion: Comparative Case Study

The curriculum-as-method (described above and in Chapter 3) and the autoethnography around which this study revolved were both rooted in narrative inquiry. As established in Chapters 1 and 2, literacy is a highly active process of meaning-making, an interaction between a reader and a text without which no new meanings can be made;

and narratives demand continuous re-visitation, re-reading, and re-storying to develop new meanings as identities, positionings, and perspectives shift and evolve (Beers, 2002; Alvermann et al, 2011; Rankine, 2020). Early Black literary societies, one foundation for abolitionist teaching models like the HRL framework that grounded this curriculum-as-method, also viewed literacy as far more than skills and knowledge, and as irrevocably intertwined with power and liberation (Muhammad, 2020, p. 22).

Storying and re-storying, central to this curriculum-as-method and my autoethnography in this study, interweave concepts from across historical times, which made it necessary to embrace a methodology (in this case, comparative case study) that, unlike more traditional models of case study, insists upon the presence of a transversal axis that cuts across spaces and time periods. Comparative case study challenges the notion of bounded case study. According to Bartlett and Vavrus (2017), individual and cultural practices (including communication) are “never isolated” but always develop in relationship with broader environments influenced by politics, economics, social strata, and more (p. 1). All practices are embedded in numerous, intersecting dimensions of context and in a broader process of social production of meaning - which inherently involves hegemonic power dynamics at play (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 3).

In comparative case study, only through a transversal axis could perceptions of Whiteness be traced through stories - and therefore through time and space, due to the slippage of these perceptions of Whiteness in, through, and out of spaces like the classroom (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Comparative case study enabled the study to trace Whiteness as participants see and experience it without bounds imposed by pre-established definitions or my notion of categorical boundaries. Comparative case study

can accommodate the full complexity of narrative and accept participants' perceptions at face value.

The HRL model's emphasis on historical context also supports this curriculum's transversal analysis of Whiteness - and students' perceptions of Whiteness - across unbounded time(s) and space(s), leading into and out of literacy instruction (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The past, as Rankine (2020) asserts, is always with and within us. History is relevant in who we are, as educators or as students or as people, and therefore impacts who we are prior to, during, and after literacy instruction. In the CCS approach, no variable, phenomenon, participant, or context is presumed to be fixed or consistently bounded – and there is no possibility of fully capturing or describing contexts (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 13). By refusing essentializing or generalizing approaches to participants and contexts and by highlighting interconnectedness, comparative case study aligns with intersectionality (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 11). As explained above, explorations of phenomena, and particularly Whiteness as a phenomenon, are so deeply embedded in contexts that positivist, generalizable results are unattainable. A comparative case study approach demands the comparison of cases across: locations, including various homes, neighborhoods, classrooms, and places of origin (horizontal axis); scales, including emotions and the impact of perceptions of Whiteness on students' lives, histories, and literary experiences (vertical axis); and historical and sociopolitical contexts (transversal axis) (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 7).

This use of comparative case study was, therefore, necessary to accommodate my theoretical framework of intersectionality and the hyperlocal narratives-as-results demanded by it, and it also aligned with the curriculum-as-study aspect of my

methodology. Leveraging comparative case study, and particularly the transversal axis that distinguishes comparative case study from more traditional models of case study, enabled this study to make a unique contribution to the field. Specifically, comparative case study held the space necessary for Me-as-educator and Me-as-researcher to enact (through autoethnography embedded into the curriculum-as-study) and model the approach that this project advocates for all educators and researchers, while maintaining the primacy of inquiry and narrative and without falling into the trap of generalizing or producing generalizable knowledge.

The study confirmed the importance of a comparative case study approach that centered the unboundedness incorporated a transversal axis through contexts and time periods. For example, it was important that in our very first session together numerous vectors of identity were on the table and actively modeled by me-as-facilitator - including religion, place of birth, disability, and more - and not only the primary aspects of identity that brought participants together (race, gender identity, and sexuality). At times, participants who had a hard time naming race or Whiteness in a specific example or part of their lives accessed an analysis of Whiteness or race by way of talking about their religion or their family, for example. Our thought processes, lives, and identities are non-linear and interdependent, thus an intersectional and unbounded approach to the study and to the curriculum was critical. Through this unboundedness, and with a curriculum and autoethnography that provided open spaces for storytelling and minimized adult intervention or imposition, numerous themes emerged that clearly intersected with participants' perceptions of Whiteness and their visions of liberating literacy instruction: Queerness, gender identity, coming out, and being outed; Religious identity; Friendship;

Sexism, sexual harassment, and assault; Drug and alcohol abuse, and addiction; Social media and the Internet; Family and home space; Community and neighborhood; Celebration and joy; Punishment; Trust; Immigration and citizenship; Colorism, racism, Latinophobia, anti-Blackness; White privilege; Justice and activism; Disability.

The transversal axis of comparative case study, in a context-specific as the curriculum-as-study necessitates, illuminated the threads in participants' perceptions of Whiteness through spaces and times. By applying this transversal axis to participants' stories, Whiteness can be traced through their family histories, in some instances long before they were born – and their family members' experiences with Whiteness in the form of direct and unforgiving oppression, discrimination, theft, and dominance can be traced, through participants' stories, to resilience, colorism, and various pressures that persist in the moment and impact and inspire students. Prior to the participants even attending my school, the transversal axis accounts for the history of Whiteness across the education system, most specifically in New York City and in the district where my school is located, and in the identities of our two administrators as well as several teachers; also taken into account, through a transversal lens, is our school's explicit commitment, for the last two years, to the pursuit of abolitionist teaching. Participants' perceptions of Whiteness in school and in literacy instruction included connections to teachers' prioritization of White voices in the classroom, overlooking or not seeing harms occurring to intersectionally marginalized students, viewing intersectionally marginalized students as exploitable, punitive approaches, injustice, public shaming or humiliation, the absence of space for students' voices or stories, and more. By using a transversal axis to trace these threads, one gains a full (and complex) understanding of my specific

participants' views on the role of Whiteness in literacy instruction and how that informs or connects to their identities and their visions for liberating literacy instruction. The transversal component would play this essential role in iterations of this curriculum-as-study conducted in vastly different contexts.

As discussed later in this section, this curriculum-as-study could be implemented in any geographic or educational setting, as the curriculum is driven by participants' and educators' narratives and reflections. This project has captured what the curriculum looked like in these specific contexts with me as the autoethnographer, and the processes are transferable while the products (narratives and questions) are absolutely not; to attempt to describe what those products might be in a different context would entail speculation. For example, in a less progressive school than mine (an important context for this implementation of the curriculum-as-study) where students are less explicitly taught vocabulary about power and identity, or in a predominantly White school, it is possible that in the first iteration of the curriculum participants would remain stuck, to some extent, in a notion of Whiteness as exclusively a personal, racial identity. In a circumstance like that, instead of attempting to change the curriculum to explicitly teach content (which would possibly undermine the value and purpose of a curriculum that is explicitly inquiry- and narrative-based), continued cycles of this process, particularly with groups of participants, along with a transversal axis analysis of the narrative-results, will surface questions, opportunities to clarify, and emphasize perceptions and stories participants already bring to the table. As seen in this implementation of the curriculum-as-study, the process itself is organized to meet participants where they are and guide them and ourselves (as educators), through questions and stories, to a deeper

understanding of our own identities and of the impact of Whiteness throughout our lived experiences.

Regardless of context, the transversal axis analysis illuminates longer histories of a particular phenomenon or institution (in this case, histories of my school and of participants' families, as well as participants' experiences in previous schools and classrooms) alongside present-day stories about the current state of affairs (such as participants' analyses of Whiteness in current literacy instruction, their analysis of their identities, and their daily perceptions of Whiteness), and even accommodating ideas about the future (in participants' visions for liberating instruction).

By middle school, gender policing was constant - and I know I did not get the worst of it. Long before I transitioned, something about my gender expression was already read as transgressive, and cisgender people of all ages, presuming (as tends to be presumed of all children) that I was cis and just not yet meeting expectations, self-authorized to let me know. In sixth grade, playing soccer on the A team, the eighth grade girls surrounded me one day on the sidelines to tell me about the tufts of blond hair poking out above my shin guards: "Ew, that's gross. You have to shave!" I made my mom teach me that evening. Earlier that year, during the summer between fifth and sixth grades, one of my soccer teammates had asked me what kind of bra I wore, and when I had not replied, she forcibly pulled back my jersey to see that I was not wearing one. "Oh my god, you don't wear a bra yet!" she announced to the rest of the team. In seventh grade, on game days when I would dress up for the school day along with the rest of my girls' sports teams, the two eighth grade boys with whom I attended advanced Math classes would not beat around the bush, informing me: "Skirts look good on the other girls. They don't look good on you." As much as I was raised with the general pressures and privileges of a middle-class White girl, from as early an age as I can remember my "tomboy" gender expression meant I was consistently seen and treated as a non-conformer by others around me. That was, until I transitioned, when so much changed. The privilege of being assumed to be conforming clashed (and still clashes with) the loss of that in-group recognition that I had for my life until age 25. In hindsight, from Girl Scout camps to summer basketball camps to the Women's Center in college when it became more explicit, starting at age 6 or 7, the other non-

conformers (butch girls, nerdy girls) and I always, always found each other.

During this time period from middle school to high school, when I was a White girl assumed to be a tomboy but forbidden from the boys' leagues and groups where I had previously found community, and then by the end of high school a White butch, I learned to fight and to win and to refuse to be vulnerable to anyone I could not trust (which included most people). By high school, instead of seeing possible connections with other athletic girls or recognizing or embracing my own gender expansiveness, I remained closeted and shrouded by judgments about and competitive animosity towards other teenage girls. I had been degraded so consistently for failing to meet a certain standard of femininity, I had so often seen the way that femininity was valued more than whatever I was, that I began to identify femininity as my enemy. In this way, I adopted a patriarchal White supremacy disguised as resistance to it. I could not name this or weed it out until long after I stopped playing sports in college. I brought with me, everywhere, the idea that vulnerability was weakness, and the enemy was possibly anybody, even those closest to me; in this rigid binary that I depended upon to make sense of the world and to feel valued in and as myself, just about everyone was against me. Needless to say, winning never protected me, and my internalized, defensive "I don't need anyone else" brought me further away from any semblance of community - and therefore from myself. In the face of challenges, Whiteness was in the way of my seeing.

Implications

I have the utmost admiration for the participants who shared their stories with me and with each other. I enjoyed our time together and value them as people - and we were able to build trust and share these stories in five sessions, a total of just three or so hours over four weeks. It is not important for me to attempt to isolate different parts of participants' stories and draw conclusions about the answers to my research questions. While the narratives-as-results, organized via comparative case study, could certainly be utilized to answer these research questions, what is more important than answer-getting is the process of sense-making and question-generating inspired by the storytelling. The

research questions provide a lens through which to read and re-read the stories narrated here, the autoethnography and the process of my pursuit of the research questions, the ideas and questions generated through this process, and how I actively use them (now and in the future) to inform my decisions and steps.

The most important contribution that this project offers is not generalizable information about queer, TGE, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx middle school students to be applied without consideration of context, but a two-pronged process (of curriculum-as-method and reflexive autoethnography) aligned with Dr. Muhammad's (2020) Historically Responsive Literacy framework. Both parts of this process absolutely must be undertaken continuously to generate the questions and reflections, in partnership between educators and students, that will move us towards abolitionism. Based on the research and voices shared throughout, this process constitutes an essential part of the work of abolitionist teaching.

This process generated countless questions that I will carry with me and that will propel me forward in my ongoing pursuit of abolitionism in collaboration with my teammates. The most powerful steps to be taken from this study entail continuously utilizing the generated questions as guidelines for ongoing self-examination and as starting points for all of our actions and decisions. Other iterations of autoethnography and other implementations of this curriculum-as-method will necessarily take different forms, so I cannot attempt to proscribe what those will be. I can, however, provide a concrete example of what these processes looked like for me in this particular iteration with three queer, TGE, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx middle school students – and what possibilities and ideas they generated.

With these specific participants, here are some of the questions, possibilities, and ideas that emerged from their narratives in conjunction with my autoethnography - which absolutely must inform any continued teaching dynamic with these participants and inform how I approach my school community, my colleagues, and my positioning on a daily basis. These questions are organized into loose, thematic categories with a great deal of slippage due to the unboundedness embraced by comparative case study, **and** with noteworthy implications for the various stakeholders in a school or district. The implications suggested by each series include implications for Autoethnography; for Abolitionist Teaching and Pedagogy; for Curriculum Planning; for School Leadership; and for Intersectionally-Marginalized Middle School Students.

Generated Questions: Series 1

- *In planning, how could I adapt this curriculum and process to anticipate students' potential challenges, center the needs of those who may have disabilities or be neurodivergent, and ensure that all students understand and have a voice?*
- *When centering anti-racism and racial justice in literacy learning, how can I foster a space where the power and impact of hegemonic Whiteness can be reflected on and named? How could I foreground, anticipate, or proactively mediate some of the concerns or anxieties that Whiteness can provoke in conversations about race?*

These generated questions illustrate implications of this study for curriculum planning, first and foremost. As explored in Chapter 2, Whiteness must be named, as a necessary step in mediating its hegemonic power, which relies on its invisibility to assert

assumed superiority. The strategy of what is often called “colorblind racism” but would be better referred to as “refusing to acknowledge race even when it is literally, visually seen,” was deliberately developed to render invisible the dominance of White supremacy (Michael, 2015; Kendi, 2016; Rankine, 2020). To combat racism, Whiteness and the culture of Whiteness must be named and made visible. This naming is the only way to answer question posed earlier: How do we imagine the country without White supremacy, when it is a force so fundamental to America that much of what we learn, or are taught, or think we know has already been constructed by it?

Not only Whiteness must be named, seen, and validated; particularly as a White person, I must not avoid race or pretend not to recognize race, and I must not pressure others to avoid talking about race. The curriculum helped me to create space with the participants where we were all pushed to name Whiteness and where participants were encouraged to share their racial identities, cultures, experiences, and reflections through story – and, just as importantly, a critical racial autoethnography was demanded of me. As Rankine (2020) asked: “If white people don’t see their whiteness, how can they speak to it?” (p. 67).

The process reinforced the urgency of centering Dr. Muhammad’s (2020) Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework in curriculum planning and creation, as well as a continuous analysis of that curriculum through the data collection embedded and through the autoethnographic process, to parse out the explicit, implicit, and null curricula as Milner (2017) describes them.

As a school administrator, this has implications for school leadership, as well: How am I, as an instructional leader in the school, supporting teacher teams in

developing this curriculum? What steps am I taking to ensure unity and consistency of abolitionist and HRL-focused curriculum across all content areas and grades? We have started taking steps towards looking school-wide, beginning with professional development sessions for all content areas around Dr. Muhammad's (2020) HRL framework, and weekly content team task analysis protocol sessions when content teams examine each grade's end-of-unit tasks through a lens of the HRL framework and Hammond's Dimensions of Equity framework (2015).

The process validated many aspects of my school's approach to curriculum, to instruction, to relationship-building, and to how we want to engage with each other in our community, which we are explicitly attempting to align with the HRL framework. The clear progression of participants' critical analysis of power and their sense of personal identity from sixth grade to eighth grade in this study suggests the role of our school's explicit curricular and instructional goals in supporting students in naming power, analyzing oppression, and celebrating and developing their identities.

This leads to clear implications for intersectionally-marginalized middle school students, especially those who are queer, TGE, and cisgender female Black and/or Latinx students. As illustrated in Chapter 2, deficit-based approaches and mindsets are harmful to the well-being and literacy learning of these populations. Creating inclusive spaces for intersectionally-marginalized identities and discussions about power, race, sexuality, and gender can combat systemic oppression in a community or school because there is "a reciprocal relationship among talk, text, and context" (Blackburn & Clark, 2011, p. 241). The curriculum planning process includes attending to the ways in which identities and power are explored to avoid becoming harmful rather than liberating to intersectionally-

marginalized students. HRL's explicit incorporation of joy as a pillar of the framework confirms the necessity of asset-based, full, nuanced, and plentiful narratives and conversations, particularly about historically marginalized peoples and identities. Framing of narratives of oppression around resistance, resilience, and excellence (agency, e.g. Black Girl Magic) rather than victimhood is important in creating space for resistance and for freedom dreaming (Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020).

Generated Questions: Series 2

- *What are the benefits and dangers of teacher modeling? How are the benefits or dangers magnified when the model involves personal identities?*
- *How is it most impactful for me to respond when a student reveals (what I perceive to be) misguided, problematic or potentially damaging mindsets or thinking? In an inquiry-based culture, when – if ever – should I resort to “telling”?*
- *What should be named publicly in a classroom, and what shouldn't be?*
- *How can I most effectively name my Whiteness (as a White educator) and privileged positionings to offer participants a clear and authentic way to engage with me and each other in the space? How will I know if I've done that?*
- *Given my specific positionings and intersecting identities, what is the most effective way to respond to students' sharing of hardships to foster trust and encourage continued exploration, sharing, and reflection?*

This set of questions generated through the study (and, as all of these questions,

included in Chapter 4) carries powerful implications for abolitionist teaching and pedagogy.

First, the questions connect to and reinforce grounding research (such as that in Chapter 2) about hegemonic Whiteness. White perspectives and those that align with hegemonic Whiteness must not be presumed to be universal. Hegemonic Whiteness assumes its universality in experience, culture, perspective, and thought, and many White people in the United States are raised to believe that we exist as individuals regardless of our racial identities - and that the meaning we make of the world is objectively accurate and true (DiAngelo, 2018; Rankine, 2020). This presumed and imposed universality must be challenged at every turn.

Refusing the myth of universality of Whiteness throughout the study, especially through an intersectional lens that recognizes the harm that can be caused by single-axis approaches, required concerted, sustained effort. As narrated in Chapter 4, this played out in the tenuous balance between adult sharing and listening and between relating through commonality and naming difference. Participants expressed eagerness to hear my stories about coming out as queer and transgender, as they named that they have not had many adults who can understand and foster a safe and affirming environment around their LGBTQ+ identities; **and** there has already been damage done by the White-washing of LGBTQ+ identities and stories in participants' lives. It would be harmful to share my stories and not name differences, or to presume universality in my queer and trans stories. The tension between how much (and when) to share my story and when to resist the pressures or desires (from numerous angles) to oversimplify or overemphasize

similarities was omnipresent, and will continue to be - not only with students, but with adults (teachers, staff, family members) as a school administrator in a position of power.

Also laid out in Chapter 4, I named one specific example of my modeling that could have simultaneously had positive and negative effects. In our first meeting together, I explicitly modeled a reflection on intersecting parts of my identity, including talking about ability. While my sharing of my experiences with anxiety and depression might have created a space where one participant (M----) felt comfortable discussing their anxiety, my sharing that I had no learning disabilities (that I knew of) might have impacted another participant's (L----'s) willingness to include her learning disability as part of her stories or her understanding of her disability as relevant. Reflecting on these generated questions can suggest some steps forward, or additional knowledge or ideas participants might share. In this case, I begin wondering: What is L----'s conception of or thinking about her disabled identity? How does she conceive of that part of herself, and how does she make meaning of her intersectional identity with that as a part of her story (since it was not in this study)? Posing these as questions for continuous reflection, rather than steadfast or fixed solutions, is critical; recognizing the limitations of teacher modeling does not mean that we should not model, and hooks' quote that is the epigraph to this chapter suggests that not only should we value stories as knowledge, but as educators we must proactively make ourselves vulnerable in the same manner we expect our students to make themselves vulnerable.

Adding to the implications for abolitionist teaching and pedagogy, the literature analyzed in Chapter 2 confirms that White people must not disown ourselves from Whiteness (there is no escaping it) or from other White people and enactments of

Whiteness, however different we may think we are. This disownment process occurs between White people in the same time (and even communities) as well as White people asked to reflect on our ancestry or recognize the impact of history, and it stems from the false belief that White people can avoid complicity in a racist system (Rankine, 2020).

To acknowledge my own Whiteness and to push myself away from binary thinking required specificity throughout the study, as I also needed to establish clearly with participants that I did not condone the harmful White behaviors they described and also that I could see why they were harmful or violent. In one particular instance in Week 3, I caught myself describing White people as “they” and said “actually, I should be saying ‘we,’ because even though I do not agree with what many White people do, I am also White” in order to model transparency and a refusal to assume my differences from other White people. This refusal to disown Whiteness or other White people, while also refusing to indulge it or White supremacy, in both my reflections and my actions is an area of ongoing growth for me.

Lastly, literature on culturally responsive and abolitionist pedagogy illuminates that students must be centered not only in the processes but at all stages throughout, as the core data to gauge impact (Hammond, 2015; Love, 2019). At any point throughout the study when I caught myself panicking about participants not showing up on time or not knowing what participants would say in each session, I reminded myself that this is what all teaching feels like - and all effective, culturally responsive teaching entails a relinquishing of (some level of) control. I can never control students, especially if I want to create spaces in which they and their voices can thrive. I reminded myself of the purpose of the study, which was not to produce generalizable knowledge or what I

wanted to hear, but to listen to participants' intersectional stories and generate possibilities for future action steps towards abolitionist teaching. In implementing the curriculum-as-method, I utilized my school's Planning Checklist (Appendix A) to inform my pedagogy and instructional priorities, which guides all of the teachers in our school in applying certain culturally responsive practices.

To pursue this last goal of culturally responsive and abolitionist teaching, the study prompted me to consider the importance of anticipating how much, as a facilitator, I am willing to contextualize and explain to students, based on their current vocabulary and critical models. I was surprised by the amount that I had to model or explain terms - such as intersecting identities, Whiteness beyond a personal identity, the words affirming and liberating - but was not surprised when students illustrated that they do understand these concepts but simply do not always have academic language for it (yet). Several times, I had to remind myself that the purpose of the study was not for students to learn things from me (such as vocabulary and definitions) in a unidirectional flow of knowledge, but rather for students' knowledge to be centered as having inherent value and for students to develop their identities, skills, criticality, and intellectualism (aligned with HRL) through authentic storytelling, questioning, and freedom dreaming. For me to do too much didactic, "front-of-the-room" teaching or for me to take the reins in a more traditional way would undermine the project. Instead, I held onto my faith that participants would learn from each other's and my experiences and narratives, and that whatever participants needed to know to understand each other's stories and my stories would be incorporated into the stories themselves.

Generated Questions: Series 3

- *What is the role of critical autobiography and autoethnography in my work?*
What work do I need to do prior to implementing a curriculum like this one? How will the work I do prior to or outside of the curriculum (such as the autoethnographic vignettes in Chapters 1, 2, and 3) connect to and impact the implementation of the curriculum?
- *What strategies do I need to use to ensure that I can name and appropriately handle my own emotions, biases, and triggers to keep the focus on students? What do I need to anticipate and be prepared for in advance of opening these spaces?*
- *What do I need to do in my everyday life, and what support systems do I need to maintain or put in place, to sustain this continuous self-interrogation, self-reflection, and healing? How is this already built into this curriculum-as-study, and where could I make it more explicit?*

This series of questions primarily offers implications for educator autoethnography. As explored in Chapter 2, doing the work of abolitionist teaching requires shifting our mindsets and language away from fixed binaries (including good/bad). White people (and cultures of Whiteness) tend to invest in good/bad binaries around race and racism to deflect away from changing racist mindsets and behaviors and towards preserving an impression or perceived status as “good” – maintaining Whiteness and White people, rather than anti-racism, as the central objective and avoiding accountability for impact using the excuse of intention (Michael, 2015; DiAngelo, 2018).

Since identity categories, as examined in Chapters 1 and 2, are definitively not binarized but simultaneously constructed, continuously shifting, **and** impactful - and

since our subjectivities and positionings are what Manning (2018) would call “more-than” and Wittig (1992) would call “an excess of ‘I’” – then only a truly intersectional lens (and not a single- or multiple-axis approach), and only a methodology that can account for this continuous movement, slippage, and unboundedness (such as comparative case study) would suffice. Denying the binary thinking foundational to White supremacy culture is also where narrative inquiry, which created space for nuance and the wholeness of participants’ stories, came into play in the study; neither participants nor any of the people they spoke about were reduced or oversimplified, cleaving the methods and results of the study (curriculum-as-method, intersectionality demanding hyper-locality, and the narratives-as-results) to its grounding research. A continuous self-examination is necessary to check binary mindsets and habits of thought, especially for those of us who are White (Meister, 2017).

Educators at all levels must interrogate and know ourselves deeply, because our mindsets, beliefs, biases, and values matter tremendously in this work. This necessitates educators continuously interrogating our power positioning, actions, and biases and the impact these have on students and the learning environment (Nieto, 2003). The autoethnographic process built into this curriculum-as-method follows in these footsteps, utilizing useful tools such as inquiry, humility, and storytelling as a form of praxis in engaging in its necessary self-interrogation. At my school, ongoing self-examination and exploration has been named as an important starting-point and entry point into collaborative work. Our Racial Equity Committee has incorporated self-examination as an explicit, regular part of our professional learning using Dr. Love’s text, and a core group of teachers and administrators working through equity-centered cycles has also

identified this as a central priority. What does this self-examination look like when it grows in scale and scope? How can we push and challenge each other in that process?

This also carries implications for abolitionist teaching and pedagogy and for curriculum planning. As named in Chapter 2, educators' mindsets, beliefs, and actions impact students' engagement; holding high expectations of students is necessary to engage students in the intellectualism and criticality demanded by the HRL framework (Delpit, 2002; Muhammad, 2020). Planning abolitionist curriculum and enacting abolitionist pedagogy "asks us to question the piece of the oppressor that lives in all of us," to interrogate our well-intentioned politics, and to be accountable for harm we cause (Love, 2019, p. 122). The autoethnography, as underpinning of abolitionist teaching and curriculum planning, is essential in the process of putting "something on the line in the name of justice" (Love, 2019, p. 159).

Generated Questions: Series 4

- *How can I center intersectional voices and perspectives, and especially value the insights of those most intersectionally marginalized? How can I shift away from single-axis critiques or limitations?*
- *What is needed in my school or on my team to consistently embrace story, narrative, restorative processes, and process-valued-as-product? Where do I (and we) make time for unchallenged, uncensored storytelling in the classroom – and how might this be valuable and centered?*
- *When do I have the desire to punish (students or adults), and where does that desire actually come from? How do I practice responding to the behaviors of*

others (students and adults) that challenge me by opening my mind to multiple narratives, asking questions, and listening? How much more learning can be present when I am able to offer grace to those in my community, most especially when conflict or harm occurs?

- *How can I foster the mindset that nobody is just one thing, and the belief that nobody is reducible to one part of who they are?*

These questions have significant implications for intersectionally-marginalized students, including queer, transgender or gender-expansive, or cisgender female Black and/or Latinx students. As laid out in Chapter 2, not only does intersectionality center those who are “multiply-burdened” by intersectional identities, but it refuses to allow single-axis analyses to dilute or erase parts of their narratives and stories (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Intersectional approaches can help combat the hierarchies that can be reproduced and inadvertently reinforced through single-axis approaches, and can help, for example, change the continued dominance of Whiteness in LGBTQ+ activism and mainstream visibility (Kiesling, 2017). In this study alone, a more expansive and consistent intersectional lens might help M---- see Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American or Pacific Islander representation prized within queer and trans communities. By encouraging the “hyper-local, and not generalizable,” intersectionality embraces all students in all of their complexity and in their intersectional identities and accommodates the fact that these identities and stories shift and move (Love, 2017).

There are also implications here for both autoethnography and school leadership. As explored in Chapter 2 and mentioned at the start of this chapter, educators must push

ourselves towards asset-based, not deficit-based, thinking and language, across the board and most particularly with students.

The process of the study pushed me to think more consistently about this and to try to notice when and how deficit-based mindsets were taking hold. Asset-based mindsets have been named at my school as important, along with remaining low-inference to avoid generalizing assumptions, but we have a great deal of work to be done. Like many Title I and predominantly-Black and -Brown schools in New York City, where racist, high-stakes standardized tests are used as primary barometers of success (though it must be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic offers an unparalleled opportunity to reconsider this), as a school we have not yet reworked our data collection plan. We have not yet developed definitions of literacy or numeracy or academic success that do not brand the majority of our students “deficient” or “behind” the moment they walk through our doors.

Additionally, these questions offer implications for abolitionist teaching and pedagogy and for curriculum planning. Per tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy and the HRL framework, in order to achieve at their highest potential (in any way), all students need to feel safe and seen in their intersecting identities, have time and energy invested in the development of their identities, and have their identities validated by the texts they are exposed to (Li, 2010; Gay, 2000; Sims-Bishop, 1990). All educators must invest in knowing their students deeply as people and as learners, and in centering this knowledge in planning, instruction, and interactions with students, families, and colleagues (Hammond, 2015).

The curriculum-as-method was explicitly built around this priority from the HRL framework. A related concept raised through the study is that the identities of the educators in a building or classroom matter, **and** that the identities of the educators in a building are not in and of themselves a guarantee of abolitionism. Reflecting on our school, our two administrators are White, and our teaching body is predominantly Black, Latinx, and intersectional - and this was noted by at least one participant, in contrast to a previous school they had attended. There are more LGBTQ+ educators at my current school than I have worked with before in education and in other schools, but it is just starting to become a significant lens for the school as a whole.

Lastly, this curriculum-as-study's valuing of storytelling and narrative enforces an asset-based approach to students and to their knowledge base and centers the curriculum-as-method around forms of knowledge that students already offer. In this curriculum's connection to Manning's (2018) research-creation, it demands that educators recognize intellectuality and inherent value that are already present in the stories participants tell and the way that they tell them (p. 11).

Generated Questions: Series 5

- *How could engaging in processes like this curriculum and autoethnography with more of my students and/or colleagues, and exploring the three axes of participants' perception of Whiteness and their visions of liberation, inform my school leadership and/or how and what I teach?*
- *How am I centering and immediately involving families in this ongoing conversation, as an integral part of supporting our students? What can I (or must*

I) do or think differently to fully value and leverage the tremendous extent to which students learn from and with their families? How could the tensions between students and their families, if acknowledged and processed as a community, strengthen family-school partnerships?

- *How and where can we create opportunities for students to use their culturally responsive, anti-racist, and social justice-oriented learnings to problem-solve personal or family situations and experiences?*
- *Where are we providing opportunities for students to bring to the table their everyday perceptions of and experiences with race, racism, and Whiteness – including in social media and the Internet - in order to leverage them for learning and help navigate tensions for students?*

This question series, centered around collaboration with community, brings implications for school leadership and for abolitionist teaching. As explored in Chapter 2, to support students in flourishing in school, students' families must be centered not only in the processes but at all stages throughout, as co-educators of children and often profound influences on students' lives (Hammond, 2015; Love, 2019, Mapp & Bergman, 2019). As established throughout this project, we must challenge the superiority of individualism and meritocracy that White supremacy culture values over collectivity and interdependence, a hierarchy that often attributes achievement and opportunities through a lens of individual choices and attempts to remove all critique of systemic oppression and privilege from the equation (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 27-29).

I was raised with competition and winning as central to my self-worth, seeing enemies where I should have seen potential community; as I grew, I decided to learn

what community means and how to build instead of just tear down, and I must recognize that there are many people who have been doing this long before I began to try. This makes the autoethnographic element of the process even more necessary, out of an understanding of oneself (in this case myself) as interdependent with my entire school community even when it does not seem readily apparent. I have the responsibility to understand myself, including when I am at my most vulnerable or ashamed or triggered, to continuously reflect on my mindsets and actions, and to proactively and continuously (re)assessing the impact of my work. The most impactful way to approach this work is through narrative and narration (Nieto, 2003; Hammond, 2015; Meister, 2017).

This series of questions carries implications for autoethnography and for intersectionally-marginalized students. During this study, challenging my internalized prioritization of individualism played out in many ways, including in checking my impulse to impose my own personal experiences (or assumptions embedded within me because of them) on participants or anyone else. In Chapter 4, I reflected on a story that one participant (J----) shared, about her fifth grade teacher forcing her to clean up after younger students, which had momentarily reminded me of my fifth grade teacher assigning me to mentor a younger student. I had to do the work of checking an impulse to impose my experience, which was definitively different, on J---- and to consider whether her teacher deserved the benefit of the doubt. My experience with my own fifth grade assignment does not invalidate or negate J----'s experience.

In Chapter 4, J---- also shared that her parents met through drug use, and that her mother in particular continues to struggle with it. My autoethnography through Chapters 1, 2, and 3 proved incredibly important groundwork for moments like that. I escaped

somewhat unscathed (at least relative to many I know), after a little more than a year, from immersion in drug addiction and substance abuse – **and** this does not mean that anyone could do it if they just tried hard enough. Additionally, the experience of drug abuse and addiction does not mean that a parent or family member is unworthy of collaboration or unimportant in a student’s life, and therefore I must not allow my deepening knowledge of students’ challenges to lead to any assumptions.

Generated Questions: Series 6

- *What support do I need and what steps can I take, in my daily life and in my school or district, to examine whether I am doing the work I hope and/or profess to be doing?*
- *As an educator, what data do I choose to collect or look at to gauge the alignment of my intentions with my impact?*
- *How do I determine whether I harmed students? Where do students’ voices live in determining this? How do I create spaces where students are empowered to tell me when I have made a mistake?*
- *How can I ensure that learning about race, racial injustice, Whiteness, and anti-racism does not become an emotional dump or drain on Students of Color?*

These questions have significant implications for abolitionist teaching and school leadership. As discussed in Chapter 2 and as part of the imperative to resist White supremacy, we must be able to focus on impact over intent. This includes being willing to analyze and consider all data without selectively leaving some out - as I detailed doing on several occasions in Chapter 4. What data are we using to define success and to gauge

our impact? Where do students' and family voices factor in there? There are certainly steps I would have taken differently if I were to do a new iteration of the study, first being actually administering the Padlet "before and after" to solicit some more concrete data about the study's impact on participants. I would also conduct the entire study in-person and create more space during the sessions for arts-based creation (as detailed in Chapter 3). Lastly, as also described in Chapter 3, if more students were to participate in a future iteration of this study, and especially if the facilitator could not be with all groups, I would recommend spending several sessions foregrounding the Courageous Conversations protocol so participants can get comfortable utilizing it themselves and internalizing the value of the protocol.

This series of questions also offers implications for curriculum planning. By 2021, Dr. Muhammad (2020) has explicitly included a fifth element to the Historically Responsive Literacy framework: Joy. This element is critical in abolitionist curriculum planning, including the joys of solidarity and justice (Love, 2019, p. 121). Joy demands that we push back against the (often well-intentioned) tendency of teachers to focus exclusively on the "perspective of oppression" when incorporating narratives about or from People of Color, which is severely limiting in scope and also can have significant, negative impacts on Students of Color emotionally and psychologically (Michael, 2015, p. 101).

Lastly, these questions offer implications for intersectionally marginalized students, particularly in valuing their voices and stories as our primary data and as knowledge-bearing (Manning, 2018). These questions can help me center the most marginalized students, as abolitionist teaching strives to do, in the building of community

and solidarity, and in driving our collective pursuit of liberating literacy instruction. Abolitionist teaching strives for freedom, which requires investing in not just tearing everything down but in building something powerful and beautiful from the pieces and elements that already exist – expanding the possibilities and work and people in the world who have long been and who already are invested in this work (Love, 2019, p. 89; Kumanyika, 2020). This connects to Gay’s (2000) expectation that culturally responsive lessons be emancipatory and transformative.

Generated Questions: Series 7

- *How can we build students’ comfort and skills in freedom dreaming and proactively offer them space to do this abolitionist and transformative vision-building?*
- *What does liberating, intersectional, and affirming instruction look and feel like - to me? To my colleagues? To students? To students’ families? Where are the convergences and divergences? What possibilities, visions, and questions can my community generate through our numerous, intersectional lenses?*
- *What is the optimal balance between attending to what students say or think that they want or need in the classroom as children, and what adults with similar intersecting identities look back and wish they had had? To frame it in a less potentially ageist way: To what extent must abolitionist, restorative, and culturally responsive pedagogies be responsive to who students are in the present moment, and to what extent must they respond to the intersectional plethora of possibilities of who students will (or might, or could) be in the future?*

These questions connect directly to autoethnography, to school leadership, and to abolitionist teaching, because, as Love (2019) asserts, abolitionist educators “fight for children they will never meet or see, because they are visionaries” (p. 90). We must validate and celebrate the full selves of intersectionally marginalized students, and “dark students” as Love (2019) refers to them – their selves including “past, present, and future” (p. 121). Freedom dreaming enables us to be visionaries in solidarity with each other. As Kelley (2002) wrote, freedom dreaming involves imagining a world in which intersectional Black and Indigenous liberation could be possible – and pursuing it.

In order to become an abolitionist educator, then, I must leverage autoethnography to refuse Whiteness to limit my imagination the way it will continuously and insidiously attempt to. I must expand the narratives I have for intersectionally marginalized students in my imaginary. This includes resisting the binary thinking, imposed gender binaries, transphobia, and homophobia that (as explained in Chapter 2) has been traced, at root, to White supremacy (Bederman, 1995; DiAngelo, 2018; Schuller, 2018). As Rankine (2020) asserts, I must pursue freedom dreaming to “clear the clouds” and to explore the “what if... the hypotheticals” and expand my mind to “a new sentence in response to all my questions” (p. 11).

For an example of this expansion: When I see a middle school student that I currently presume is a cisgender boy – am I able to envision a possible future in which this student is non-binary, or a transgender girl or woman, and/or queer? If I cannot imagine that as a possibility, if I allow hegemonic assumptions (e.g. everyone is cisgender until proven otherwise) to limit the possibilities for this student in my own mind, then I might be missing elements of their past, present, and future that they have

not articulated (yet) – and I am exacerbating oppressions for that child and others in my classroom or in my school. How could I expect my students’ imaginations to flourish if I have so thoroughly limited my own? If this child is struggling to get along with classmates or appears to be disengaged in class, if I am not able to imagine expansive possibilities about who the student is now and may become, I will be led down a path of misdiagnosis by virtue of this lack of imagination. This path eschews consideration of systemic factors and leads me deeper into traditionalist, fixed, and deficit-based “causes” that too often lead to punishment or blaming of a student for their own oppression (Shalaby, 2017). Actively creating space for the possibility that students were, are, or will be queer or TGE has never harmed or unduly influenced a student; the utter absence of these possibilities is devastating.

This series of questions carries implications for teachers and school leaders in encouraging reflection about how to support and validate students in their freedom dreaming. All three participants in this study found it challenging to envision and describe what affirming and liberating literacy instruction might look and feel like, beyond naming a great deal of what currently happens in my school that is different from or better than their previous school experiences. Throughout the study, they each had a degree of comfort naming race, which could stem to some extent from our school-wide, explicit push to decenter Whiteness, to foster identity, and to build criticality per the HRL framework – in combination, of course, with participants’ lives and communities outside of school. Did participants’ “I don’t know” responses about their visions come from a sense that our school is doing at least some of what they would envision? Or are these responses a result of our school not creating spaces where students are encouraged to

freedom dream and to know that their visions and stories are valid and valuable? Have we failed to routinize storytelling as a valid form of knowledge, or to normalize questions for which there are no “correct” answers? When faced with an open-ended question about their dreams and visions, do students balk because they have become too accustomed to intellectual compliance – such as anticipating or predicting the “right answer” that we adults have in our minds, whether we say it or not? Do these participant “I don’t know” responses to such an open-ended question indicate that we have in some ways inhibited their comfort or ability to dream – or just that we have not done enough to help them recover what dreaming may have already been tamped down through previous schooling?

Lastly, this series of questions has tremendous implications for intersectionally marginalized students. Freedom dreaming, especially through art, would develop students’ ability to imagine a different reality, and to advocate and agitate for a liberating society (Kelley, 2002, p. 9). Art, including narrative and imagining, “is how dark children make sense of this unjust world and a way to sustain who they are... art is a homeplace; art is where they find a voice that feels authentic and rooted in participatory democracy” (Love, 2019, p. 100). Art, whether through storytelling or visual arts, both of which were foundational in this study, carves out a free space for creativity that is critical for students to access their freedom dreams.

Generated Questions: Reflection

This is only a selection of the questions and possibilities generated through this study and that emerged from participants’ narratives and my autoethnography in Chapter 4. Which of these questions and ideas, generated through my iteration of these processes,

are most useful for you-as-reader to consider? Better yet, which are most necessary for you to consider? Which are you most reluctant to consider? How might those inform how you modify or implement this two-part process (this curriculum and autoethnography) on your own, in your classroom, school, or district?

The vulnerability I am feeling as I close this particular study lets me know that this means something, if not everything it needs to. My (current) stories are expressed here for meaning-making alongside participants' narratives. I do not expect that anything about this project is comprehensive; I fully expect that my perspective on much of it will change and grow with time and ongoing dialogue. As I submit this, I experience a sensation similar to the one I have had numerous times when getting a new tattoo: I embrace what it means, in this particular moment in my life and in my relationships with my communities. And I commit to this comprising just a start, and just a fraction, of my action-taking and self-examination, my leaning into the messiness of true conversation. In a matter of days, I may be retelling my stories differently, as should and must happen - likely thanks to critical feedback and new stories layered in from more voices than I have encountered as of this specific moment, the introduction of new ideas that I had never considered before, the exposure of more ways in which Whiteness is in the way of my seeing. Now that this is completed, it drives and informs the next cycle. Disengagement is not an option. How must I show up?

Parameters

Guided by intersectionality and narrative inquiry and structured by comparative case study, this study prioritized the perceptions and stories of participants whose full experiences have, to date, been generally excluded from research in the fields of education and literacy studies. Leveraging intersectionality as both a lens to name differential harm and also to explore different ways of seeing and making meaning, this study took action to generate the questions, possibilities, and ideas necessary to pursue abolitionist teaching.

Intersectionality demands fullness, which only narrative can attempt to accommodate. Because we are unbounded, because our identities and constructed categories move, to pursue abolitionist teaching we must wield culturally responsive frameworks that promote identity exploration and the naming of hegemonic Whiteness, continuous self-examination, and freedom dreaming led by those most marginalized in our communities - all of which are enacted by the processes-as-products of this curriculum that generates narratives-as-results and the autoethnography composed of stories.

Each part of the study - from the autoethnography before, during and after the study; to the HRL-based curriculum starting with identity exploration; to tracing participants' perceptions of Whiteness using the three axes of comparative case study; to the narratives-as-results organized using comparative case study, and more - was essential for both its coherence in the face of unboundedness and fidelity to its foundational goals. The questions emerging from storytelling form the core of this study, and considerations of these questions must drive future research, instructional coaching cycles, administrative decision-making, teacher and district professional development, teacher team meetings, instructional planning, and more: How do students' positionings at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and other identities support unique and powerfully transformative ways of seeing? How do these ways of seeing offer insight into the legacy and future of revolution, of freedom dreaming, and of envisioning societies and classrooms and schools that do not yet exist? What is the value and potential power of refusing single-axis and multiple-axis approaches to identity? What is the value of storytelling?

Rather than attempt to produce generalizable knowledge or singular truths about the participants or their broader categorical affiliations, the study has produced processes that are absolutely urgent and essential for all educators, especially those of us who already intend and hope to pursue abolitionist teaching - though even those who do not have an ethical obligation to understand why they must. This study hopefully has tapped into and perhaps even expanded our collective capacity, as researchers and educators, to closely examine hegemonic Whiteness, to strategically employ cycles of inquiry- and narrative-based abolitionist pedagogy, to embrace our processes as the most critical products, to seek fewer answers and more questions and possibilities to fuel our communal freedom dreaming about what liberatory literacy instruction could be and do (for all of us), and to cherish the wholeness of intersectionally marginalized students at the heart of the process.

As discussed previously, a study like this one does not have inherent limitations, as it is explicitly responsive to its participants and educators – through narrative and storytelling, for examples – and does not attempt to produce generalizable information but instead to produce a two-pronged process that could be replicated in any educational context. This said, the study has parameters, most notably that this sample iteration of the curriculum offers a model with just three participants in one, New York City, public middle school.

This curriculum could be implemented by teachers, with a small group of student participants as I did here, with a class of students broken into small groups, across a grade team, across a school, or even across a district. It could also be implemented by administrators or superintendents with teachers and staff at one school or schools across

districts. However, in order to implement this curriculum, an educator or researcher must be invested in the pursuit of liberating and abolitionist literacy instruction – meaning they must invest in, at minimum, the learning shared throughout this project. As described above, while the specific implementation of each part of the process illuminated here could be modified and adapted, each of the core elements (especially the autoethnography before, during, and after) are essential. Truly accepting and investing in ongoing processes as products in and of themselves, and avoiding the impulse to generalize or leap to assumptions, is not an easy task for any educator, immersed as we are in a sea of compliance, bureaucracy, and urgency to appear like we are making strides (whether we are or not). Anyone implementing this must be able to value students' stories, perceptions, identities, and visions as they are, and engage in the autoethnographic work, to center student voices in imagining what liberatory literacy instruction might look and feel like. Process must be the consistent home of any implementations of this study, which is not to say that immediate actions cannot be taken – for example, after L----'s comment about loving horror books, I conducted an immediate inventory of our classroom libraries and generated a list of 300 titles we will need to add this summer - but that we recognize that immediate solutions will not themselves solve deep-rooted, systemic issues and also that they do not constitute freedom dreaming.

I do not believe that participants' prior knowledge or vocabulary around race is necessary to conduct this curriculum-as-method, as the purpose is to accept participants where they are and generate questions and possibilities in the pursuit of abolitionist literacy instruction. There are significant benefits to meeting students wherever they are

in this work, though it undeniably helped in my iteration of this study that students were already at least somewhat equipped with a vocabulary about race and Whiteness. As a White child in middle school, I do not know if I would have been so able to describe or identify Whiteness at that time - precisely due to the impact of hegemonic Whiteness as explored in this study – so I could imagine that, with certain populations of students, additional sessions could be incorporated prior to the start of the curriculum as currently presented, along with Singleton’s (2015) Courageous Conversations protocols, to ensure a robust reflection and conversation. I cannot make this decision for an educator or researcher in a different context than my own. These parameters absolutely must be considered by educators who aim to implement this curriculum in their own context and by future researchers.

With the absence of inherent limitations noted, a thorough examination of the present moment and the contexts for this iteration of this curriculum-as-study reveal some possible, externally imposed limitations. Over the past two years, incited by former president Donald Trump, Republican politicians across the country have introduced legislation in several states to ban what they call “critical race theory” in schools – in most cases employing “critical race theory” as a stand-in or catch-all for “anti-racist” and “culturally responsive” (Adams, 2021). The curriculum-as-method (including the autoethnographic process) here takes definitive stances, naming critical race theory as urgently necessary for everyone and most specifically for intersectionally marginalized students and declaring these attacks on critical race theory to be violent and informed by White supremacy. One important consideration stemming from this recognition is: Could this curriculum-as-study be utilized in one of these states? And if so, how?

While the processes comprising this curriculum-as-method could be implemented anywhere and with any students (or adults), it would certainly come under fire from any powers-that-be who wish to ban anti-racist, abolitionist, or culturally responsive pedagogy. This raises a context-based limitation of the curriculum-as-method, namely: It must be conducted by someone who does not deny the realities of racism as it differentially impacts People of Color in the present-day United States. The individuals implementing this curriculum must intend to do something in their school(s) to combat racism and be willing to explore what and how. As Robin DiAngelo's (2018) White Fragility could be leveraged by any individual (of any identity) but is specifically targeted towards progressive White people, this curriculum-as-method could be applied in any contexts but is geared towards folks who, in maintaining a baseline recognition of race and racism as factors pervading (and informing) the U.S. education system, have not fully succumbed to the delusions advanced by White supremacy.

If an educator in a state where critical race theory is under attack nevertheless fits this description and wants to implement this curriculum-as-method, they can absolutely do so. The more advocates for this curriculum in all contexts, the more powerful a coalition we build. A teacher, administrator, or superintendent must make a personal decision – or even better, a collective decision in solidarity with local community: To blatantly defy top-down compliance orders and implement this curriculum anyway, standing up and loudly refusing to sweep White supremacy and its devastation of intersectionally marginalized students under the rug, or to implement this curriculum quietly in their own classroom or school, engaging students' identities and perceptions and narratives at the center of instructional decision-making as they always should be, by

almost any ideology of pedagogy. All methodologies moving towards abolition are important, and all stories of this pursuit are welcomed in the community formed around this curriculum-as-method.

This curriculum does not aim to convert or convince those whom White supremacy and Whiteness have terrified into believing they or theirs are harmed by critical race theory. This is not because people who fit this description are hopeless or written off permanently, but because this curriculum chooses to invest its energies and efforts into those who already have anti-racist intentions and modicum of awareness of power. Rather than move in circles around the rhetoric of racism deniers or politicians tearing down critical race theory without attempting to understand it (which fortunately there are educators and activists dedicated to doing as I write this), this curriculum-as-study prioritizes coalition-building and self-examination over rhetoric wars and damage control. I aim to deepen community with courageous folks who understand that we must put something on the line in the name of justice (Love, 2020). There are so many of us who are on board and who can engage a curriculum like this in many powerful, abolitionist ways.

Future Research

Future research dedicated to expounding upon this study could take many forms. A future study could implement this curriculum-as-method and autoethnography with a demographically different or larger group of students, to explore what questions and possibilities are generated. Another researcher could revise or rework this curriculum-as-method to adapt it to their specific contexts. One particularly rich possible direction for

further exploration might be along the three axes of comparative case study. Along a vertical axis: What would it look like to incorporate family members alongside students in this curriculum-as-method? What could it look like to involve teachers, administrators, and more – even an entire school? Along a horizontal axis: What about conducting this with a group of students across teacher teams, or across an entire school, or across schools within a district?

The most important aspect of future research is that it become iterative and cyclical. The questions generated must inform and propel a school or district or teacher forward towards liberatory and abolitionist literacy instruction – which means that ideally, the study would not be conducted only by someone entirely external to a school or classroom. If an external researcher did want to conduct a follow-up study, they should do so in direct collaboration with at least a teacher or administrator who could ensure the questions, wonderings, and possibilities are truly generative in a classroom or school.

Educators are also encouraged to explore, adapt, and implement this curriculum-as-method and autoethnography. An administrator or instructional coach could collaborate with teachers across a grade or content team, to support them in implementing this curriculum-as-method and autoethnography as a department-wide initiative. A superintendent could collaborate with principals to have educators in each school across a district implement this curriculum-as-method and autoethnography, as a district initiative. The possibilities are as extensive as our imaginations will allow them to be.

As a member of my communities, as a human being, as an educator, I have an ethical and spiritual imperative to engage in the messiness of this authentic work. This will look different for different people, at least in the process-oriented and

autoethnographic portions; **and** the same imperative remains, for every one of us. In this project, I have attempted to offer just one example of what these processes – the process-as-product, the crux of the work behind and through abolitionist literacy instruction – can look like. The autoethnography in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 were not just an exercise but absolutely necessary in my work with participants throughout the study; the autoethnography in Chapter 4, during the study, and in Chapter 5 afterwards, were essential in keeping the iterative cycle moving. I can only hope that sharing my processes will make it easier for other educators to do so, as well.

The processes of engaging with abolitionist teaching are “not just about tearing down and building up but also about the joy necessary to be in solidarity with others, knowing that your struggle for freedom is a constant but that there is beauty in the camaraderie of creating a just world” (Love, 2019, p. 120). I commit to continue unlearning and eradicating the individualism prioritized by Whiteness, and to deepen my understanding of what it looks and feels like to be in solidarity with community. Embracing interdependence is not easy – in fact, this element of abolitionist teaching requires “welcoming struggles, setbacks, and disagreements” (Love, 2019, p. 90). Freedom dreaming and resistance are ongoing processes. Together, we find beauty in them.

Two days before I conclude this project, a parent of a non-binary student comes in to meet with me and my principal, claiming to support however the student identifies - but not until later on, when they are older. The parent uses the incorrect pronouns the entire time, implies that my open transness is unduly influencing the student, and insists that we administrators not allow the student the options that we expressly offer to all of our students – to change their name on the school email account and to use the gender neutral bathroom. I feel frustrated and upset by the conversation afterwards, though I hold myself together during it. It appears to me that the parent is struggling in many ways, far beyond the gender identity of the student. My principal and I spend time after school that day

considering what we need to do to support this student. We wonder what parents like this one might need – and of that, what the two of us can provide, and what might need to be provided in a different way. Now that we have an increasing population of out LGBTQ+ students, we begin to envision creating a community of family members of LGBTQ+ students.

As I walk, a bit deflated, out of the school building that afternoon, I hear someone call my name. M---, followed by his mom and younger siblings, runs up to me and, to my surprise, gives me a hug. One of his brothers, following his lead, embraces me, too – though we had never met before. After proudly showing me a pot with a plant that he has started to grow in his after-school program, he runs off. In my slowly improving Spanish, which I am pushing myself to more confidently utilize, I wish his mother and family a good evening.

The week before I submit this dissertation, Derek Chauvin is convicted of second-degree murder in the killing of George Floyd, having been branded as a “bad apple” by other police during the trial. Just thirty minutes prior to the announcement of the Chauvin verdict, 16-year-old, Black teenager Ma’Khia Bryant was shot and killed by the Ohio police she had called to help her. On my Instagram, those tossing around the term “justice” for the Chauvin verdict are met with responses that resonate, along the lines of: Justice would mean no more hashtags, no more racist police brutality and murder, no more dying. It is acknowledged that this verdict is far more than Black and Brown communities have historically gotten by way of accountability – but it is far from enough, and even far from a version of accountability where there is any acknowledgement of harm or anything close to apology or repair.

The next day, a Black teacher at my school reached out to me to discuss her plan to offer the choice of a restorative circle, for anyone on our staff reeling from trauma, during the next morning’s Racial Equity Committee-led professional development session. The restorative circle structure is one we have invested in learning about together throughout this year, and there was no more important time to start it. This teacher and I discussed the importance of holding space for our community and recognizing differential harm.

That weekend, an LGBTQ+ and Latinx teacher reaches out about a youth walk-out in Washington Square Park the following week. The event will protest the most recent State-sanctioned killings of Youth of Color and honor the lives of the young people murdered, including Ma’Khia Bryant, 13-year-old Adam Toledo, 17-year-old Anthony Thompson Jr, 19-year-old Christian Hall, and 20-year-old Daunte Wright. The teacher and I speak with our White principal, who confirms that this is a priority for anyone in our school community who wants to walk out of school that day. Within an hour, we have shared the relevant information and permission forms with our staff and community, messaging: Everyone is welcome to attend, to tell the State that you have had enough, and to be in community and

solidarity with other students across the city. We will say their names and fight for a world in which there are no more names that need to be said.

Questions will propel me forward over the next few weeks: How can I hold space for my community? How can I recognize and name differential harm within my school? How can I ensure that all members of my school community, especially the most intersectionally marginalized and the so-called troublemakers, feel and know that they matter and that their stories matter? As an educator and as a human, I close out one cycle and open the next, leaning into this heart-wrenching work and into the messiness of true conversations as though – because - my soul and freedom also depend upon it.

APPENDIX A

Planning Checklist of Instructional Priorities.

I co-created the Planning Checklist in 2018-2019 along with my school's principal and instructional coach. Through collaboration with teachers, we have modified it over the past two years. This is a pared-down version of the teacher-facing document.

<i>Planning Checklist Priority</i>	<i>Research Base: Examples</i>
1. Lesson is student-centered; 25+ minutes of each 45-minute period consist of ALL students reading, authentically writing, or engaging in academic talk.	- <u>The Handbook of Reading Disability Research</u> edited by McGill-Franzen and Allington (2011).
2. Avoid Teacher- Student- Teacher (TST) discussions with the whole class to prioritize engaging all students equitably in discussion.	- <u>Disrupting Thinking</u> by Kylene Beers and Bob Probst (2017). - <u>Content Area Conversations</u> by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Carol Rothenberg (2008). - <u>Total Participation Techniques</u> , 2nd Edition by Persida Himmele and William Himmele (2017).
3. Incorporate student-led discussion into every single lesson. Protocols are in place to ensure that all students are practicing specific discussion skills and vocabulary and engaging with concepts (not just rules and methods).	- <u>Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain</u> by Zaretta Hammond (2015). - <u>The Handbook of Reading Research</u> (Vol IV) edited by Pearson, Kamil, Moje, and Afflerbach (2010). - <u>Arguing from Evidence in Middle School Science</u> by Osborne, Donovan, Henderson, MacPherson, and Wild (2016).
4. Discussion – and not only student writing - is tracked by both teachers and students as a product as part of the assessment of students' content knowledge and mastery of skills. These include specific academic discussion skills.	- <u>Academic Conversations</u> by Jeff Zwiers and Marie Crawford (2011).

5. Students have opportunities to make their own connections and share their own feelings about a text, topic, or question without teacher direction.	<p>-<u>Disrupting Thinking</u> by Kylene Beers and Bob Probst (2017).</p> <p>-<u>Arguing from Evidence in Middle School Science</u> by Osborne, Donovan, Henderson, MacPherson, and Wild (2016).</p>
6. “Group work” time focuses on specific skills, with clear criteria for success (including teacher model when possible). Students and teacher(s) are focused on assessing the target skills. Protocols are in place to ensure that all students are practicing specific discussion skills and vocabulary and engaging with key concepts.	<p>-<u>Bringing Words to Life</u> (2nd edition) by Isabel Beck (2013).</p> <p>-<u>Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain</u> by Zaretta Hammond (2015).</p> <p>-<u>Mathematical Mindsets</u> by Jo Boaler (2015).</p>
7. Students have choices when reading, discussing, and writing. Students seem excited about or interested in the topic or text at hand; there is a pervasive feeling of joy.	<p>-<u>Disrupting Thinking</u> by Kylene Beers and Bob Probst (2017).</p> <p>-<u>Mathematical Mindsets</u> by Jo Boaler (2015).</p>
8. Not all students’ work looks the same; the focus is on students’ thinking and sense-making, not on answer-getting. There is not just one “right” answer.	<p>-“Why Americans Stink at Math” by Elizabeth Green (2014).</p> <p>-<u>The Handbook of Reading Disability Research</u> edited by McGill-Franzen and Allington (2011).</p> <p>-<u>Mathematical Mindsets</u> by Jo Boaler (2015).</p> <p>-<u>Arguing from Evidence in Middle School Science</u> by Osborne, Donovan, Henderson, MacPherson, and Wild (2016).</p> <p>-<u>Making Thinking Visible</u> by Ron Ritchhart (2011).</p>
9. Students, and not just the teacher(s), are posing questions.	<p>-<u>The Handbook of Reading Research</u> (Vol IV) edited by Pearson, Kamil, Moje, and Afflerbach (2010).</p>

	<p>-<u>Making Thinking Visible</u> by Ron Ritchhart (2011).</p> <p>-<u>Reciprocal Teaching at Work</u> by Lori D. Oczkus (2010).</p>
10. Groupings are deliberate and strategic.	- <u>Reciprocal Teaching at Work</u> by Lori D. Oczkus (2010).
11. Teacher conferring involves the collection of specific data and/or the reteaching of specific skills, aligned to the lesson objective. There is a clear strategy for conferring, small group instruction, or parallel teaching to maximize adults in the room.	- <u>Teaching Reading in Middle School</u> by Laura Robb (2000).
12. The lesson emphasizes student engagement & thinking, not work completion & compliance. All students are actively engaged in specific thinking at each step of the lesson.	<p>-<u>Making Thinking Visible</u> by Ron Ritchhart (2011).</p> <p>-<u>Mathematical Mindsets</u> by Jo Boaler (2015).</p> <p>-<u>The Handbook of Reading Disability Research</u> edited by McGill-Franzen and Allington (2011).</p>
13. All work is rigorous; it pushes students' thinking and indicates high expectations for all students.	<p>-<u>The Handbook of Reading Disability Research</u> edited by McGill-Franzen and Allington (2011).</p> <p>-<u>Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain</u> by Zaretta Hammond (2015).</p>
14. The lesson's focus skills – concepts, reading strategies, and discussion skills - are explicitly modeled by teachers to establish clear criteria for success.	- <u>Reciprocal Teaching at Work</u> by Lori D. Oczkus (2010).

APPENDIX B

Full Curriculum-as-Method.

Instructional Recommendations:

- Students should be in groups of no more than 6 students each to conduct these discussions. The teacher-as-facilitator can be a part of one, consistent group (especially if there are enough educators for each to join a group); or they can share their narratives as mini-models for the whole class and then participate in different small group discussions over the course of each session.
- To conduct these activities with a full class of students in small groups of 4-6 and adhering to the priorities of the Planning Checklist (see Appendix A), consider modifying protocols to ensure equitable discussion. For example, have each group share using a timed protocol such as School Reform Initiative's "Save the Last Word for Me" protocol, in which one student in the group has five minutes to present their narrative or arts-based creation, and then each group member (going around the group one at a time) has one minute to offer a connection or pose a follow-up question for the presenter to answer. The presenter then has one minute to share a "last word" based on their group mates' comments and questions.
- The topics, ideas, and questions students will be engaging with in this curriculum can be quite emotionally heavy or triggering. It is important to put in place frequent breaks throughout lessons, for students to have the opportunity to step away momentarily; participants should know that they can request a break at any time throughout the process. Additionally, it is important, as the curriculum demands and per Geneva Gay's (2000) work, that participants are explicitly directed to validate each other's' narratives and sharing. The Courageous Conversations protocol incorporated into the curriculum-as-method supports this, as well.

NOTE: This curriculum-as-method was conducted using this procedure, but with only one small group of students. This curriculum has been framed to be applicable (with appropriate adjustments by the respective teacher-facilitators) to larger classes of students, as well.

Curriculum-As-Method
WEEK 1
Objectives: -Participants and teachers will share stories of their personal, intersectional identities and the histories of those identities through creative expression and group interview. -Participants and teachers will generate questions and curiosities about each others' identities (and what they mean to them), each others' narrative choices, and chosen media.

Essential Questions	Procedure and Protocol:	Data Collected	Teacher-Facilitator Considerations: Self-reflexivity & Anticipating Potential Misconceptions.
What is the story (or what are the stories) of your intersecting identities and their histories? How would you tell these stories?	<p>A. Prior to beginning the study, pose the following questions to the student participants: What are the different parts of my identity? What do I think of when I think of Whiteness? When do I think Whiteness shows up in school or in my class? What do I think of when I imagine what a liberating lesson in class would look and feel like? Students' answers should be recorded in some way, via Padlet, Jamboard, Google Form, or in writing. [This piece was missed in this study's iteration of this curriculum.]</p> <p>B. At the very start of the week, teacher-facilitator introduces students to the elements of Singleton's (2015) Courageous Conversations protocol that will be utilized throughout this unit: the Compass (p. 29), the Four Agreements (p. 70), and the First Condition (p. 87). After a teacher model, students practice naming where they are located on the Compass with a partner. In small groups, students discuss what the Four Agreements and the First Condition mean to them, and what they may look like (or not look like).</p> <p>1. The next day, the teacher-facilitator explains activity: Each participant will choose a medium to express 1) the facets of their intersectional identities, 2) what their identities mean to them, and 3) their knowledge of the histories of those identities.</p> <p>2. Teacher-facilitator provides a brief</p>	<p>1. Teacher-facilitator arts-based creation and narrative (autoethnographic element).</p> <p>2. Participants' arts-based creations (artifacts of their self-expressions of intersectionality). These can serve as references, but will not be primary in the data analysis - the narratives in the transcripts in #3 will be. However, the choices of arts-based creations to express initial responses supports all</p>	<p><i>How can I model the use of the Courageous Conversations protocol to support participants' comfort with it? How can the protocol support me in sharing myself and engaging in self-reflection?</i></p> <p><i>What arts-based expression can I share (or must I share) in order to engage on the level of vulnerability and authenticity that I ask of participants? How can I both provide a useful example and avoid imposing my personal schema for the activity upon participants?</i></p>

	<p>think-aloud and visual model on a Social Identity Wheel (modeled after one from University of Michigan - example in Chapter 3): “We all have a range of identities that intersect, meaning they are all part of us at the same time. For example, I am White, queer, transgender, Assistant Principal at our middle school, born and raised in Vermont in the United States, and more - and I cannot ever remove any part of these identities from who I am.”</p> <p>3. Participants have the opportunity to complete the Social Identity Wheel and pose any clarifying questions. [In this iteration of the study, teacher and participants completed a T-chart with several identities, rather than a wheel.]</p> <p>4. Teacher-facilitator explains that students will have the opportunity to express these different parts of their identities, what they mean to them, and their histories: “The history of my identities is also a part of me: My great-grandfather immigrating to the United States from Poland (and his family before him), my parents growing up in a tiny farm town in northern New York near the Canadian border, for examples. There are also some parts of my own history that I did NOT learn about growing up, like the queer and trans ancestors who came before me.”</p> <p>5. Participants have the opportunity to make some notes about the histories of their own identities.</p> <p>6. Teacher-facilitator explains the next steps: “Over the next two days, all of us - including me - will create an arts-based expression that tells two stories: 1) The story of our intersectional identities and what they mean to us and</p>	<p>students’ access to the cognitive exercise demanded by this assignment (Hammond, 2015; Pentassuglia, 2017).</p> <p>3. Participants’ recorded narratives about their arts-based creations, their questions and responses to each other, and their reflections on the exercise (transcripts).</p>	<p>I pre-prepared my arts-based creation (in the form of the personal narrative vignettes incorporated into this paper) to conduct the autoethnographic portion prior to assigning for students. I selected several among these vignettes to share directly with students as my arts-based creation. I also framed that participants should respond to my share in the same manner that we responded to everyone else’s.</p> <p>Students may not be certain what types of questions to pose to each other or how to pose them. I pre-planned the teacher-facilitator model (in Step #7) to include some of the</p>
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	<p>2) the histories of our different identities - which can include things we do not know about our histories, too. This expression could be: a spoken narrative or poem, a story in writing, a drawing or collage or painting or something else visual, a video, or more. Get as creative as you'd like! You will be sharing it with each other on our Google Classroom and also presenting it in small groups. During those group presentations, each person will have ten minutes: Five minutes to share what you created, and then five minutes for your group to share appreciations and questions. What questions do you have?"</p> <p>7. After the arts-based creations are complete, teacher-facilitator models the next step by having the entire group look at their creation (in this case, a narrative) and illustrating how to generate questions of curiosity about the elements of the narrative (reminding students about narrative arc, characters, conflict and resolution, dialogue, flashback), the chosen medium, and the content of the story. After generating a number of questions, the teacher models how to select the one or two most interesting or important questions. Participants then listen to, look at, and/or read their small group members' arts-based creations on Google Classroom and prepare their own questions in advance.</p> <p>8. Small groups will have up to 60 minutes (depending on group size) to present and discuss their arts-based creations. Teacher-facilitator walks through the protocol for the discussion: First, every student will share their name and pronouns with their group. Then, one student volunteers to be the</p>	<p>following questions:</p> <p><i>-Why did you decide to do a narrative / painting / other medium?</i></p> <p><i>-You mentioned _____; are you comfortable telling us more about that?</i></p> <p><i>-You mention this person (character) who is important to your story. Are there any other people who are important in your story of your identity?</i></p> <p><i>-In the story, you mentioned a problem or conflict; was that problem or conflict resolved? If so, how?</i></p> <p><i>-Are there any conversations or quotes you remember that had a big influence on your identity?</i></p> <p><i>-What other identities, that you didn't address in your project, are part of your story?</i></p>
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	<p>timekeeper for the group. Next, students present one at a time. Each presenter will have up to five minutes to present their arts-based story, and their group mates have five minutes to pose questions of curiosity (prepared in advance or generated from the presentation) that the presenter will answer. During this questioning time, the teacher-facilitator will pose questions based on the elements presented in the artifact, to prompt the presenter to elaborate on potential missing portions of the narrative. The teacher-facilitator reminds the group to use the Courageous Conversations protocol throughout the conversation. For the last five minutes of the small group discussion, the teacher-facilitator will direct groups to discuss points of convergence (similarities) or divergence (differences) in the stories that were presented.</p> <p>9. The teacher-facilitator then poses the following questions for participants' metacognitive reflection and small group discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -How did it feel to share these stories with the group? -What did you learn about yourself from creating this and sharing your story? What did you learn about the others in the group? -With their own small group, the teacher-facilitator acknowledges their power-positioning (in my case as a White, adult, administrator) and encourages transparency or honesty about the following question: How did it feel to treat me (Scott, Assistant Principal) as a fellow participant in this process? -In small groups, students locate themselves on the Courageous Conversations Compass and reflect on 		<p>-You mentioned _____ as important to you - do you know anything about the history of that identity?</p> <p>-What do you think about _____ and _____ parts of your identity - what does the combination (the intersection) of these identities mean to you?</p>
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	their use of the Courageous protocol – what went well, and what could be improved?		
WEEK 2			
Objectives: -Participants and teachers will reflect on and describe what Whiteness means and looks like to them. -Participants and teachers will identify instances where they see Whiteness in their daily lives in and outside of the classroom. -Participants and teachers will surface different perspectives on what Whiteness is, looks like, and means.			
Essential Questions	Procedure and Protocol:	Data Collected	Teacher-Facilitator Considerations: Self-reflexivity & Anticipating Potential Misconceptions.
What does Whiteness mean to you? What does Whiteness look like to you? Where do you see Whiteness in your daily life - both inside and outside of school - and how has it impacted you and your life?	1. Teacher-facilitator explains activity: “Over the next three days, you will be doing another creative task - a photo elicitation. This time, you will use your phones to take photographs or find photographs online. You will take photographs (or find photographs) that capture experiences in your life outside of school, and some from inside school. These daily photographs should capture your perceptions of Whiteness - so you should look for people, places, activities, objects, times, spaces, and more that show what Whiteness looks like to you, what it means to you, and how it has impacted your life.” Teacher-facilitator then shares two examples of photographs, one that they took that morning in their everyday life and one that they found online that illustrates something they see in the school building. They explain that both of these photographs capture a perception of Whiteness - that will not	1. Teacher-facilitator photographs and narrative (autoethnographic element). 2. Participants’ photographs and descriptions (artifacts of their self-expressions of perceptions of Whiteness). These can serve as references,	As the teacher-facilitator (and researcher) I did not want to preload students with my own conceptualizations of Whiteness - though I did want and need (in part because of age and developmental stage) to ensure students had enough of a foundation to think about Whiteness and what it means to them.

	<p>be explained right now, but will be shared with small groups later.</p> <p>The teacher-facilitator clarifies: “There is no required number of photos you have to take each day - and there is no right or wrong perception or association, nor is there any specific definition of Whiteness that should influence you. The most important thing is that you capture whatever it is - anything, at any time, and any place - in which you perceive Whiteness. At the end of each day, you will add your photos to the assigned Google Slides deck in Google Classroom, along with a brief (one to three sentence) explanation of where and when you perceived Whiteness.” Teacher-facilitator models how to do that with the two photographs they shared, and then takes questions or clarifications.</p> <p>2. Over the next three days, the teacher-facilitator monitors participants’ daily uploads into their Google Slides. Teacher-facilitator confers with participants who have not uploaded any photographs and/or descriptions by the second day to offer support and discuss any potential questions or confusions they may have. [In this specific iteration of the curriculum, as noted in Chapter 3, it emerged that students were having a hard time completing anything in addition to their class work, which they were already finding overwhelming in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. From this point on in the study outlined in this dissertation, instead of having students complete anything outside of these sessions, the teacher provided time at the start of sessions for the arts-based elements.]</p>	<p>but will not be primary in the data analysis - the narratives in the transcripts in #3 will be. However, the choices of photographs express initial responses supports all students’ access to the cognitive exercise demanded by this assignment and also set the stage for tracing Whiteness through unbounded contexts (Hammond, 2015; Pentassuglia, 2017; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).</p> <p>3. Participants’ recorded narratives about their photographs</p>	<p>Recognizing that my Whiteness and power positioning (as researcher and Assistant Principal) as hegemonic could have lended themselves to participant awkwardness, nervousness, or reticence particularly with any negative or critical associations with Whiteness, I did need to be proactive in creating a space where participants did not feel pressure to adjust or modify their perceptions to accommodate a perceived White fragility on my part (DiAngelo, 2018). This informed my decision to participate in the photo elicitation activity and to conduct a brief</p>
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	<p>3. After the photograph collection is complete, the teacher-facilitator explains how the small group discussions will work and reminds students that they will utilize the Courageous Conversations protocol in their conversations. [In this specific study, the teacher was able to remain with the group at all times and had limited time, and therefore did not continue to utilize the Courageous Conversations protocol. It is still recommended for use, especially for larger groups of students.]</p> <p>Then, small groups have up to 60 minutes (depending on group size) to present and discuss their photographs. First, every student will share their name and pronouns with their group. Then, one student volunteers to be the timekeeper for the group. Next, students present one at a time. Each presenter will have up to five minutes to share their images and explanations of how the images represent a perception of Whiteness. After each participant shared, the group had five minutes to discuss the following guiding questions:</p> <p><i>-What does Whiteness mean and look like to this person - and why?</i> <i>-How has Whiteness impacted their life? What examples of perceptions of Whiteness did they share that make you think that?</i></p> <p>4. After all presenters shared their photographs, the teacher-facilitator poses the following questions for groups to discuss together:</p> <p><i>-What similarities and differences did we notice across our perceptions of Whiteness?</i> <i>-Thinking about our intersectional identities that we explored last week, do</i></p>	<p>and perceptions of Whiteness, their follow-up discussions about what Whiteness means to them, their conversation about divergence and convergence, and their reflections on how and if their intersectional identities influenced how they perceived Whiteness (transcripts, narratives).</p>	<p>model; that gave me the opportunity to name Whiteness in various forms, along with negative or critical connotations - to take a deliberate step towards mitigating the potential impact of my identities and positioning.</p> <p>In the event that I encountered silence or confusion participants, I pre-planned to probe that silence and to name my Whiteness and its potential impact on the discussion and participants. If I noticed participants moving in a direction of a singular definition of Whiteness - I was prepared with the following, framing that there are no</p>
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	<p><i>you think they influence our perceptions of Whiteness - for example, would someone with different identities see Whiteness in the same ways and places - and if so, how?</i></p> <p><i>-How did it feel to share and discuss this topic?</i></p> <p>-With their own small group, the teacher-facilitator acknowledges their power-positioning (in this case as a White, adult, administrator) and encourages transparency or honesty about the following question: <i>Do you think my intersectional identities (especially being White, the researcher, and Assistant Principal) impacted what you shared here in any way - and if so, how?</i></p> <p>- In small groups, students locate themselves on the Courageous Conversations Compass and reflect on their use of the Courageous protocol – what went well, and what could be improved?</p>		<p>correct answers but I am probing for deeper understanding: <i>I notice that you identified specific White-identified people; are there other characteristics of this that make you think of Whiteness? Do you see Whiteness as always involving White people?</i></p> <p>The goal here was not to challenge, modify, or change students' perceptions but to ensure that they had whatever guidance and permission they needed to freely share the entirety of their conception of Whiteness.</p>
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WEEK 3

Objectives:

- Participants will track their perceptions of Whiteness in three Humanities lessons and how these perceptions of Whiteness made them feel during their literacy learning.
- Participants will share their perceptions of Whiteness during these Humanities lessons - and how these perceptions made them feel - and describe what they perceived in the portions of the lessons where they did **not** perceive Whiteness.

-Participants will compare their perceptions of Whiteness within the Humanities lessons to their experience in the school as a whole, including in other classrooms.
 -Participants will discuss if and how they believe their intersectional identities influenced how and where they perceived Whiteness in the lessons.

Essential Questions	Procedure and Protocol:	Data Collected	Teacher-Facilitator Considerations: Self-reflexivity & Anticipating Potential Misconceptions.
Where and when do you perceive Whiteness in literacy instruction? How do these perceptions of Whiteness make you feel? Do your intersectional identities influence how and when you perceive Whiteness?	1. Teacher-facilitator explains the next step of the unit: “Last week, through your photo projects and our conversation, we learned about where we perceive Whiteness in our daily lives, and how these perceptions of Whiteness make us feel. This week, we are going to do something similar - but we are going to focus specifically on your Humanities classes. This week, during three specific lessons, you will be taking notes on a piece of paper that you have made into a T-chart.” [Teacher-facilitator models while explaining.] “The left side of the T chart is where you will make a note of every time in the lesson that you perceive Whiteness - and that is anywhere in the lesson, the teachers, the text, classmates. Truly, anywhere, just as we did last week. If you think you may be perceiving Whiteness but you aren’t sure, write it down! And on the right side, you will jot down how that perception of Whiteness (or potential perception) made you feel. You can even use the Courageous Conversations Compass as a tool to share where you are, if that is helpful! I will be visiting, too, to make sure I have the experiences in your Humanities classes, too. What questions do you have?”	1. Participants’ original notes during lessons and during small group discussion. 2. Teacher-facilitator’s notes during the lessons (autoethnographic element). 3. Three lesson plans. 4 Recording of small group conversations (transcript, narrative).	In addition to the questions planned in advance, I needed to be prepared to support my specific participants in understanding and responding to the prompts without imposing my schema (of race, Whiteness, and identity) upon them. This entailed taking detailed notes on each lesson so I could cite specific examples, as needed, to help students better understand (and more easily respond to) the potentially abstract question

	<p>2. Teacher-facilitator leads participants in a norming and practicing activity, saying: “Right now, we are going to practice together to make sure you are comfortable doing this. I am going to play a five-minute video clip of an online lesson (the teacher-facilitator chooses this) and while we watch we are all going to make notes. Make sure your papers look like this.” Teacher-facilitator shows note catcher. “Remember, even if you aren’t sure that you’re perceiving Whiteness but you think you may be, make a note and we will talk about it. If you don’t think you perceive any Whiteness anywhere, that is all right, too.” Teacher-facilitator and participants watch the video clip and make notes. [In this specific iteration of the curriculum, there was no sample video. It is recommended, especially for larger groups.]</p> <p>3. The teacher-facilitator explains and models: “Right after the lesson, you will take a few minutes to go back to your notes and add as much detail as you can to make sure you remember exactly what was going on in your mind and heart. For example...” Teacher-facilitator shares an example using their notes from the video, and showing how to possibly use the Courageous Conversations Compass to help process. “Take two minutes and add any details that you can.” Then, the teacher-facilitator offers students the opportunity to discuss in small groups, sharing their perceptions of Whiteness and how it made them feel from the clip; and lets participants know that they will upload a photo of their notes each day to their assigned Google Document in Google Classroom. [Similar to above, there was no sample</p>		<p>prompts around perceiving Whiteness and how they felt about it.</p> <p>Additionally, anticipating that some students might have a hard time naming how their perceptions of Whiteness in the moment made them feel, I prepared the following Likert scale options to offer anyone who needed it:</p> <p><i>3-More engaged in the lesson</i> <i>2-Engaged in the same amount in the lesson</i> <i>1-Less engaged in the lesson</i></p>
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	<p>video in this specific study, but it is recommended.]</p> <p>4. For the next three days, participants take notes during Humanities lessons. Each day, the teacher-facilitator monitors participants' uploads to Google Classroom, to confer with any students who do not upload anything or whose submissions are confusing or indicate confusion. [In this study, only one visit occurred. In other contexts or iterations, the teacher-facilitator can determine, along with colleagues, which class(es) student participants visit for this project. Ideally, students visit the teachers' own classroom. Teachers of any classrooms involved should be notified.]</p> <p>5. The teacher-facilitator explains the protocol for 45 minutes of small group discussion about participants' perceptions of Whiteness in their Humanities lessons. The teacher does not model, but just reminds students that they should use the Courageous Conversations protocol to guide the discussion. The first round of discussion, which will be approximately 10 minutes (and teachers could utilize a specific protocol such as the ones recommended above if helpful), uses the following guiding question: <i>Where and when did you perceive Whiteness in these three Humanities lessons this week? How did each make you feel in the moment? How do you feel about them now?</i> By the end of the discussion, each participant in the small group should have shared at least two specific examples of when they perceived Whiteness in literacy instruction and how it made them feel, including as much detail about the situation as</p>		
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	<p>possible. Throughout the discussion, the group members are encouraged to ask clarifying questions or to challenge or elaborate upon others' ideas using the following sentence stems:</p> <p><i>-Since I was not in that class with you, can you tell us more about...?</i></p> <p><i>-I disagree with this specific part of what you said, because...</i></p> <p><i>-Based on what you shared, I agree and would like to add...</i></p> <p>6. Teacher-facilitator explains the second round of small group discussion, which will last approximately five minutes. The first question that all group members should discuss is: <i>Were there times when you weren't sure if you perceived Whiteness or not? Describe it, and let's see what the group thinks.</i></p> <p>7. The teacher-facilitator then explains the third round of small group discussion, providing the following guiding question for the next five minutes: <i>Think about one of the three lessons from this week. Now, think about a time during that lesson when you did NOT perceive Whiteness. What was happening during these parts of the lesson? How would you describe them, and how did they feel? Then, participants have three minutes to write their thoughts about the following question: If you did not perceive Whiteness in a part of a lesson, does that mean there was no Whiteness there? What WAS there during those parts?</i></p> <p>8. For the fourth round of discussion, which lasted six minutes, the guiding questions were: <i>Compare your perceptions of Whiteness in these three Humanities lessons to your experience</i></p>		
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	<p><i>in the school as a whole. Do you think you would perceive Whiteness in other classrooms or in the school more, less, about the same, in different places? Would it make you feel the same, or different? Explain.</i></p> <p>9. The last round of sharing was led by these two questions: <i>What similarities and differences did we notice across our perceptions of Whiteness? Thinking about your intersectional identities and histories that we explored two weeks ago, do you think they influenced your perceptions of Whiteness - for example, would someone with different identities have seen Whiteness in the same ways and places? Explain.</i></p> <p>10. In small groups, students locate themselves on the Courageous Conversations Compass and reflect on their use of the Courageous protocol – what went well, and what could be improved?</p>		
WEEK 4			
<p>Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Participants will create an arts-based expression of their freedom dream for literacy lessons - their visions for what would be included in a lesson that is liberating. -Participants will reflect on how their intersectional identities informed their vision-building. -Participants will reflect on ways in which their thinking has changed, shifted, or remained the same over the course of the study. -Participants will discuss their dynamics with other students and the teachers and if or how these dynamics impacted them during the study. 			
Essential Questions	Procedure and Protocol:	Data Collected	Teacher-Facilitator Considerations: Self-reflexivity & Anticipating Potential Misconceptions.

<p>What makes you feel seen and validated, in all your intersectional identities, in a lesson? What would a liberating lesson look, feel, and sound like to you, and what would you recommend to teachers? Would Whiteness exist in that lesson - if so, where? How has your thinking - about yourself, your intersectional identities, Whiteness, or literacy instruction - changed over the course of this unit of study?</p>	<p>Procedure and Protocol:</p> <p>1. Teacher-facilitator explains the final week of the unit: “This week, you will have time to create a third and final arts-based expression, which we will share together in our small groups. Just like before, this project can be any length and in any medium - poetry, song, visual arts, photographs, entirely up to you. In this, you should create a vision of a school, a Humanities class, and a lesson - meaning it is entirely up to you, and you are imagining no boundaries or limitations on what could exist. Create a vision for what that school, class, and lesson would look, sound, and feel like if it were <i>liberating</i>. What do you think liberating means?” Participants have the opportunity to jot their thinking about this question and then share ideas.</p> <p>The teacher-facilitator continues provides a brief description of freedom dreaming and its roots in Black history, activism, and academia. Then: “Your project should illustrate your vision for a school, class, and lesson that does not yet exist, that would make you feel validated and free in all of your intersectional identities. In two days from now, you should upload it into the Google Document provided in your Google Classroom. What questions do you have?”</p> <p>2. Teacher-facilitator provides participants with some time to start building out their ideas. Then and over the next two days, teacher conferences with students to offer support, scaffolds, and to hear their initial thoughts. [In this iteration of the study, due to limited time, participants were</p>	<p>1. Participants’ arts-based creations (artifacts and expressions of intersectionality).</p> <p>2. Recordings of the small group discussions (transcripts).</p>	<p>To anticipate potential challenges or confusion throughout this stage of the curriculum, the teacher-facilitator must ask: <i>What do I do if participants have a hard time understanding or conceptualizing any of these prompting questions? What examples could I offer to make these questions more concrete?</i> To avoid influencing participants’ responses too much, one option would be to have students’ own examples from previous stages ready to share to illustrate these concepts, rather than offering one’s own ideas or examples</p> <p><i>Do I as the researcher</i></p>
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	<p>given the opportunity at the start of the final session to create whatever they would like. All participants chose to complete a graphic organizer. It is recommended that future iterations create plenty of time in session for students to try various art-based modes, and that several models be shown.]</p> <p>3. On the day of small group discussions, the teacher explains the structure for the discussions, reminding students to utilize the Courageous Conversations protocol. After each participant shares, the groups will have time to pose a very specific type of question. The teacher does not provide a model with their own creation; though they can participate in a group, they should not share first.</p> <p>4. During the small group discussions, which last 45 minutes, each participant in the small group takes turns presenting their arts-based expression of choice. After a participant has five minutes to share their vision or freedom dream of liberating literacy lessons - what they would look, feel, and sound like, and why. Then, the group had five minutes to pose the following questions to the presenter:</p> <p><i>-How are your visions different from what is currently happening here, now?</i></p> <p><i>-Would Whiteness exist in your vision of a liberatory lesson? If so, where - and what should teachers do? If not, how could teachers ensure it isn't there?</i></p> <p><i>-What recommendations would you have for a teacher who says they would like their lessons to feel liberating to you? What questions should teachers ask ourselves?</i></p>	<p><i>participate in this stage?</i></p> <p>While transparency has been critical to the autoethnographic aspect was critical in this study and curriculum, based on abolitionist and intersectional ideas that those who are most harmed by and disempowered by systems of oppression are best equipped to take the lead in our process of freedom dreaming, I did not believe I as the researcher should foreground my vision for liberatory literacy lessons. I was careful about how much of my own thinking to share during this part and focused on eliciting as many stories, wonderings, and questions from students as possible.</p>
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	<p>5. Then, the teacher-facilitator posed further questions, for small groups to discuss: <i>How did each of your unique, specific intersectional identities help you create these visions? What were some points of convergence and divergence across the visions you shared? What do those points of convergence and divergence indicate about what a liberatory lesson could look like?</i> Lastly, in small groups, students locate themselves on the Courageous Conversations Compass and reflect on their use of the Courageous protocol – what went well, and what could be improved?</p> <p>6. Lastly, the teacher-facilitator directs students to do a free write about the following questions. <i>-How has your thinking - about your own identities, about Whiteness, about literacy lessons - changed over the course of this study?</i> <i>-How did it feel to work with me - your White, queer, and transgender Assistant Principal - throughout this process?</i> <i>How would you describe our dynamics - did they help or impede your authentic participation?</i></p> <p>7. At the very end of the curriculum, the teacher returns to the questions that student participants answered prior to the unit (via Padlet, Jamboard, Google Form, etc), and asks them to answer the questions again: What are the different parts of my identity? What do I think of when I think of Whiteness? When do I think Whiteness shows up in school or in my class? What do I think of when I imagine what a liberating lesson in class would look and feel like? This time, the additional questions should be included: How has this unit changed my thinking or answers about these</p>	<p><i>How do I ensure that students will honestly describe how it felt to work with me, and how my identities may have impacted their authentic responses?</i></p> <p>First, I used explicit framing of this question that involved naming the power dynamics (and specifically my power positioning as a White administrator and researcher) that could have been barriers to honesty, and naming White fragility as a pervasive phenomenon that can pressure People of Color to accommodate White feelings rather than speak their truths (DiAngelo, 2018). This explicit naming</p>
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	<p>questions? How did it feel to tell your stories through this unit? What did you like about the unit, and what would you change if you could? [This before-and-after recorded element was missed in this study's iteration of the curriculum, though it was conducted verbally.]</p>		<p>can create a space where participants may be less likely to censor themselves out of a fear for my feelings. Second, this was not the first time I had named our power dynamics and three of the most important principles of combating White supremacy within myself: Resisting binary thinking (especially good/bad binaries), naming the impact of my Whiteness on myself and the space, and proactively checking my own White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). This was established as early as possible in the process of the study, and continuously revisited throughout - including</p>
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			<p>encouraging participants to hold me as researcher accountable to enacting these principles.</p> <p><i>What do I do if some students within the group setting resort to simply agreeing with what other participants have stated? I pre-prepared this follow-up question for any time when a student's contribution was simply an agreement with a peer: I hear that you agree with this other participant. How is your thinking similar to what they said, and how is it different?</i></p>
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APPENDIX C

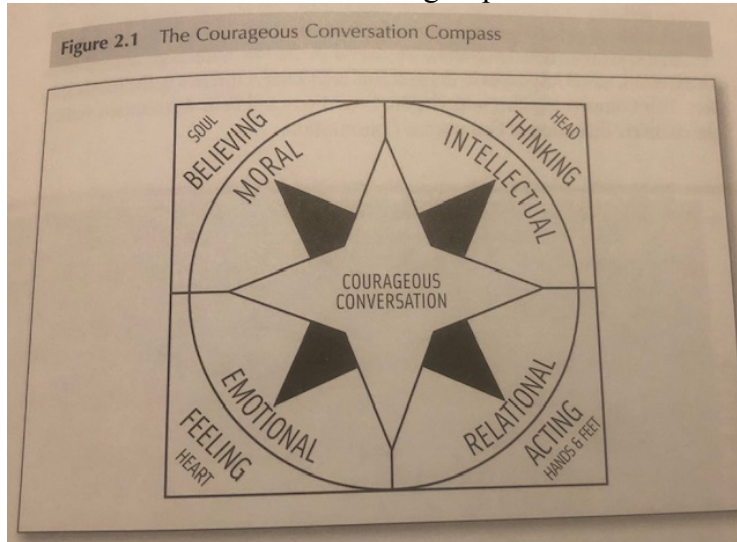
New York State Next Generation Learning Standards for English Language Arts in Grade 8 addressed in the curriculum in Appendix B.

- 8R6: In literary texts, analyze how the differences between the point of view, perspectives of the characters, the audience, or reader create effects such as mood and tone.
- 8W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, relevant descriptive details and clear sequencing.
- 8W4: Create a poem, story, play, artwork, or other response to a text, author, theme or personal experience; explain divergences from the original text when appropriate.
- 8SL1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners; express ideas clearly and persuasively and build on those of others.
- 8SL2: Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse formats (e.g., including visual, quantitative, and oral) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

APPENDIX D

Courageous Conversations Compass and Protocol (Singleton, 2015, p. 29, 70, & 87).

Compass: Will be utilized at the end of each group interview for participants to locate themselves and discuss with the group.



Protocol Part 1: Four Agreements. This will be introduced in a brief meeting at the start of Week 1 and utilized during every group interview.

**FOUR AGREEMENTS OF
COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION**

To participate effectively in interracial dialogue about race, the first step is to commit to honoring and practicing the Four Agreements of Courageous Conversation. By committing to these, participants agree to

- Stay engaged
- Experience discomfort
- Speak your truth
- Expect and accept non-closure

Protocol Part 2: First Condition. This will be introduced in a brief meeting at the start of Week 1 and utilized to guide and structure every group interview.

PERSONAL, LOCAL, AND IMMEDIATE

APPENDIX E

Protocol for Arts-Based Expressions, as used in Week 1.

1. Teacher-facilitator explains activity: Each participant will choose a medium to express the facets of their intersectional identities, what their identities mean to them, and their knowledge of the histories of those identities.
2. Teacher-facilitator provides a brief think-aloud and visual model on a Social Identity Wheel (modeled after one from University of Michigan - example in Chapter 3): “We all have a range of identities that intersect, meaning they are all part of us at the same time. For example, I am White, queer, transgender, Assistant Principal at our middle school, born and raised in Vermont in the United States, and more - and I cannot ever remove any part of these identities from who I am.”
3. Participants have the opportunity to complete the Social Identity Wheel independently, for themselves, and pose any clarifying questions.
4. Teacher-facilitator explains that students will have the opportunity to express these different parts of their identities, what they mean to them, and their histories: “The history of my identities is also a part of me: My great-grandfather immigrating to the United States from Poland (and his family before him), my parents growing up in a tiny farm town in northern New York near the Canadian border, for examples. There are also some parts of my own history that I did NOT learn about growing up, like the queer and trans ancestors who came before me. I did not know anything about queer or trans people until recently, when I started learning about that part of myself.”
5. Participants have the opportunity to jot down their initial thoughts about the histories of their own identities.
6. Teacher-facilitator explains the next steps: “Over the next two days, all of us - including me - will create an arts-based expression that tells two stories: 1) The story of our intersectional identities and what they mean to us and 2) the histories of our different identities - which can include things we do not know about our histories, too. This expression could be: a spoken narrative or poem, a story in writing, a drawing or collage or painting or something else visual, a video, or more. Get as creative as you’d like! You will be sharing it with each other on our Google Classroom and also presenting it in small groups. During those group presentations, each person will have ten minutes: Five minutes to share what you created, and then five minutes for your group to share appreciations and questions. What questions do you have?”
7. Two to three days later, after the arts-based creations are completed, the teacher-facilitator models the next step by having the entire group look at their creation (in this case, a narrative) and illustrating how to generate questions of curiosity about the elements of the narrative (reminding students about narrative arc, characters, conflict and resolution, dialogue, flashback), the chosen medium, and the content of the story. After

generating a number of questions, the teacher models how to select the one or two most interesting or important questions. Participants then listen to, look at, and/or read their small group members' arts-based creations on Google Classroom and prepare their own questions in advance.

8. Then, proceeding to the group interview: Small groups had up to 60 minutes (depending on group size) to present and discuss their arts-based creations. Teacher-facilitator walks through the structure for the discussion, reminding participants of the Courageous Conversations protocol.

9. Every student shares their name and pronouns with their group. Then, one student volunteers to be the timekeeper for the group.

10. Students present one at a time. Each presenter has up to five minutes to present their arts-based story, and their group mates have five minutes to pose questions of curiosity (either prepared in advance or in-the-moment) that the presenter will answer. During this questioning time, the teacher-facilitator also poses probing questions to prompt the presenter to elaborate on potential missing portions of the narrative.

11. For the last five minutes of the small group discussion, the teacher-facilitator directs groups to find and name as many points of convergence (similarities) or divergence (differences) in the stories that were presented as possible.

12. The teacher-facilitator then poses the following questions for participants' metacognitive reflection and small group discussion:

- How did it feel to share these stories with the group?
- What did you learn about yourself from creating this and sharing your story?
What did you learn about the others in the group?
- With their own small group, the teacher-facilitator acknowledges their power-positioning (in my case as a White, adult, administrator) and encourages transparency or honesty about the following question: How did it feel to treat me (Scott, Assistant Principal) as a fellow participant in this process?
- Participants and teacher-facilitator locate themselves on the Courageous Conversations Compass and reflect on their use of the Courageous protocol – what went well, and what could be improved?

APPENDIX F

Protocol for Photo Elicitation and Group Interview, as used in Week 2.

1. Teacher-facilitator explains activity: “Over the next three days, you will be doing another creative task - a photo elicitation. This time, you will use your phones to take photographs or find photographs online. You will take photographs (or find photographs) that capture experiences in your life outside of school, and some from inside school. These daily photographs should capture your perceptions of Whiteness - so you should look for people, places, activities, objects, times, spaces, and more that show what Whiteness looks like to you, what it means to you, and how it has impacted your life.” Teacher-facilitator then shares two examples of photographs, one that they took that morning in their everyday life and one that they found online that illustrates something they see in the school building. They explain that both of these photographs capture a perception of Whiteness - that will not be explained right now but will be shared with small groups later.

2. The teacher-facilitator clarifies: “There is no required number of photos you have to take each day - and there is no right or wrong perception or association, nor is there any specific definition of Whiteness that should influence you. The most important thing is that you capture whatever it is - anything, at any time, and any place - in which you perceive Whiteness. At the end of each day, you will add your photos to the assigned Google Slides deck in Google Classroom, along with a brief (one to three sentence) explanation of where and when you perceived Whiteness.” Teacher-facilitator models how to do that with the two photographs they shared, and then takes questions or clarifications.

3. Over the next three days, the teacher-facilitator monitors participants’ daily uploads into their Google Slides. Teacher-facilitator confers with participants who have not uploaded any photographs and/or descriptions by the second day to offer support and discuss any potential questions or confusions they may have.

4. Three days later, after the photograph collection is complete, the teacher-facilitator explains how the 60-minute small group interview will work, reminding participants of the Courageous Conversation protocol. Every student shares their name and pronouns with their group. Then, one student volunteers to be the timekeeper for the group.

5. Students present and explain their photographs one at a time. Each presenter has up to five minutes to share their images and explanations of how the images represent a perception of Whiteness.

6. After each participant shares, the group has five minutes to discuss the following guiding questions:

- What does Whiteness mean and look like to this person - and why?
- How has Whiteness impacted their life? What examples of perceptions of Whiteness did they share that make you think that?

7. After all presenters share their photographs, the teacher-facilitator poses the following questions for the group to discuss together:

- What similarities and differences did we notice across our perceptions of Whiteness?
- Thinking about our intersectional identities that we explored last week, do you think they influence our perceptions of Whiteness - for example, would someone with different identities see Whiteness in the same ways and places - and if so, how?
- How did it feel to share and discuss this topic?
- With their own small group, the teacher-facilitator acknowledges their power-positioning (in my case as a White, adult, administrator) and encourages transparency or honesty about the following question: Do you think my intersectional identities (especially being White, the researcher, and Assistant Principal) impacted what you shared here in any way - and if so, how?
- Participants locate themselves on the Courageous Conversations Compass and reflect on their use of the Courageous protocol – what went well, and what could be improved?

APPENDIX G

Protocol for Classroom Visits and Group Interview, as conducted in Week 3.

1. Teacher-facilitator explains the next step of the unit: “Last week, through your photo projects and our conversation, we learned about where we perceive Whiteness in our daily lives, and how these perceptions of Whiteness make us feel. This week, we are going to do something similar - but we are going to focus specifically on your Humanities classes. This week, during three specific lessons, you will be taking notes on a piece of paper that you have made into a T-chart.” [Teacher-facilitator models while explaining.] “The left side of the T chart is where you will make a note of every time in the lesson that you perceive Whiteness - and that is anywhere in the lesson, the teachers, the text, classmates. Truly, anywhere, just as we did last week. If you think you may be perceiving Whiteness, but you aren’t sure, write it down! And on the right side, you will jot down how that perception of Whiteness (or potential perception) made you feel. You can utilize the Courageous Conversations compass if it is helpful. I will be visiting, too, to make sure I have the experiences in your Humanities classes, too. What questions do you have?”
2. Teacher-facilitator leads participants in a norming and practicing activity, saying: “Right now, we are going to practice together to make sure you are comfortable doing this. I am going to play a five-minute video clip of a previous online lesson by teachers in the school and while we watch we are all going to make notes. Make sure your papers look like this.” Teacher-facilitator shows note catcher. “Remember, even if you aren’t sure that you’re perceiving Whiteness, but you think you may be, make a note and we will talk about it. If you don’t think you perceive any Whiteness anywhere, that is all right, too.” Teacher-facilitator and participants watch the video clip and make notes.
3. The teacher-facilitator explains and models: “Right after the lesson, you will take a few minutes to go back to your notes and add as much detail as you can to make sure you remember exactly what was going on in your mind and heart. For example...” [Teacher-facilitator shares an example using their notes from the video, also illustrating how to use the Compass if helpful.] “Take two minutes and add any details that you can.” Then, the teacher-facilitator offers students the opportunity to discuss in small groups, sharing their perceptions of Whiteness and how it made them feel from the clip; and lets participants know that they will upload a photo of their notes each day to their assigned Google Document in Google Classroom.
4. For the next three days, participants take notes during Humanities lessons. Each day, the teacher-facilitator monitors participants’ uploads to Google Classroom, to confer with any students who do not upload anything or whose submissions are confusing or indicate confusion.
5. Four days later, the teacher-facilitator explains the protocol for 45 minutes of small group discussion about participants’ perceptions of Whiteness in their Humanities lessons

– and reminds participants of the Courageous Conversations protocol. The teacher does not model, to avoid influencing students’ thinking.

6. The first round of discussion, which was approximately 10 minutes, uses the following guiding question:

- Where and when did you perceive Whiteness in these three Humanities lessons this week?
- How did each make you feel in the moment?
- How do you feel about them now?

7. By the end of the discussion, each participant in the small group should have shared at least two specific examples of when they perceived Whiteness in literacy instruction and how it made them feel, including as much detail about the situation as possible. Throughout the discussion, the group members are encouraged to ask clarifying questions or to challenge or elaborate upon others’ ideas using the following sentence stems. The teacher models probing:

- Since I was not in that class with you, can you tell us more about...?
- I disagree with this specific part of what you said, because...
- Based on what you shared, I agree and would like to add...

7. Teacher-facilitator explains the second round of small group discussion, which will last approximately five minutes. The first question that all group members should discuss is:

- Were there times when you weren’t sure if you perceived Whiteness or not? Describe it, and let’s see what the group thinks.

8. The teacher-facilitator then explains the third round of small group discussion, providing the following guiding question for the next five minutes:

- Think about one of the three lessons from this week. Now, think about a time during that lesson when you did NOT perceive Whiteness. What was happening during these parts of the lesson? How would you describe them, and how did they feel?

9. Then, participants have three minutes to write down their thoughts about the following question:

- If you did not perceive Whiteness in a part of a lesson, does that mean there was no Whiteness there? What WAS there during those parts?

10. For the fourth round of discussion, which lasts six minutes, the guiding questions provided by the teacher-facilitator to the whole group were:

- Compare your perceptions of Whiteness in these three Humanities lessons to your experience in the school as a whole. In this way, is the classroom similar to others?
- Do you think you would perceive Whiteness in other classrooms or in the school more, less, about the same, in different places?
- Would it make you feel the same, or different? Explain.

9. The last round of sharing was led by these two questions, posed by the teacher-facilitator:

- What similarities and differences did we notice across our perceptions of Whiteness?
- Thinking about your intersectional identities and histories that we explored two weeks ago, do you think they influenced your perceptions of Whiteness - for example, would someone with different identities have seen Whiteness in the same ways and places? Explain.
- Participants locate themselves on the Courageous Conversations Compass and reflect on their use of the Courageous protocol – what went well, and what could be improved?

APPENDIX H

Protocol for Arts-Based Expressions and Group Interview, as implemented in Week 4.

1. Teacher-facilitator explains the final week of the unit: “This week, you will have time to create a third and final arts-based expression, which we will share together in our small groups. Just like before, this project can be any length and in any medium - poetry, song, visual arts, photographs, entirely up to you. In this, you should create a vision of a school, a Humanities class, and a lesson - meaning it is entirely up to you, and you are imagining no boundaries or limitations on what could exist. Create a vision for what that school, class, and lesson would look, sound, and feel like if it were *liberating*. What do you think liberating means?” Participants have the opportunity to jot their thinking about this question and then share ideas.
2. The teacher-facilitator continues provides a very brief description of freedom dreaming and its roots in Black history, activism, and academia. Then: “Your project should illustrate your vision for a school, class, and lesson that does not yet exist, that would make you feel validated and free in all of your intersectional identities. In two days from now, you should upload it into the Google Document provided in your Google Classroom. What questions do you have?”
3. Teacher-facilitator provides participants with some time to start building out their ideas. Then and over the next two days, teacher conferences with students to offer support, scaffolds, and to hear their initial thoughts.
4. On the day of small group discussions, the teacher explains the structure for the discussions, reminding participants of the Courageous Conversations protocol. After each participant shares, the groups will have time to pose a very specific type of question. The teacher does not provide a model with their own creation; though they can participate in a group, they should not share first.
5. During the small group discussions, which last 45 minutes, each participant in the small group takes turns presenting their arts-based expression of choice. After a participant has five minutes to share their vision or freedom dream of liberating literacy lessons - what they would look, feel, and sound like, and why, the group had five minutes to pose the following questions to the presenter:
 - How are your visions different from what is currently happening here, now?
 - Would Whiteness exist in your vision of a liberatory lesson? If so, where - and what should teachers do? If not, how could teachers ensure it isn't there?
 - What recommendations would you have for a teacher who says they would like their lessons to feel liberating to you? What questions should teachers ask ourselves?
5. Then, the teacher-facilitator posed further questions, for small groups to discuss:
 - How did each of your unique, specific intersectional identities help you create these visions?

- What were some points of convergence and divergence across the visions you shared? What do those points of convergence and divergence indicate about what a liberatory lesson could look like?
- Participants locate themselves on the Courageous Conversations Compass and reflect on their use of the Courageous protocol – what went well, and what could be improved?

6. Lastly, the teacher-facilitator directs students to do a free write about the following questions.

- How has your thinking - about your own identities, about Whiteness, about literacy lessons - changed over the course of this study?
- How did it feel to work with me - your White, queer, and transgender Assistant Principal - throughout this process? How would you describe our dynamics - did they help or impede your authentic participation?

APPENDIX I

Parent/Guardian Permission Form.

Dear Parent/Guardian of Participant:

Your child has been selected to participate in a study to learn more about middle school students' intersectional identities, how and where they perceive Whiteness in their lives and in the literacy instruction in their classrooms, and their visions for liberatory instruction.

This study will be conducted by Scott Moore, Assistant Principal at the school and Ph. D candidate in the Department of Literacy Studies at St. John's University, as part of his doctoral dissertation work. His faculty sponsor is Dr. Adam Clark.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, your child will engage in a one-hour interview each week with Scott and two to four other middle school students. This will occur for five weeks from February to March 2021, for a total of five interviews. In between some of the interviews, participants will be asked to create an arts-based expression of their identities or their vision for liberatory instruction, or to take photos that they connect to Whiteness. Participants will upload these artifacts to a Google Classroom shared only with the small group and the researcher (Scott).

The five interview sessions will take place on Zoom, and they will be recorded. The recordings will be kept in a file private to the researcher and the transcriber and destroyed after the study is complete. There are no known risks associated with your child participating in this research beyond those of everyday life.

Federal regulations require that all subjects be informed of the availability of medical treatment or financial compensation in the event of physical injury resulting from participation in the research. St. John's University cannot provide either medical treatment or financial compensation for any physical injury resulting from your participation in this research project. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board (718-990-1440). Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand the identities, perceptions, and vision of middle school students to help improve literacy instruction.

Confidentiality of your child's contributions and artifacts will be strictly maintained by removing their name, and any identifiers will be replaced with a pseudonym. The middle school's name is not explicitly stated in the study, though it is stated that the researcher is Assistant Principal there.

Consent forms will be stored in a separate location from the interview documentation and will be kept in a secure file on the personal computer of the researcher. Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others. Participants' contributions to the five group interviews will be kept confidential or anonymized by the researcher, who will encourage this of the entire group – but the researcher cannot guarantee what other students in the group will do.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may refuse to participate or withdraw your child at any time without penalty. Nonparticipation or withdrawal will not affect your child's grades or academic standing.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Scott Moore at scott.moore18@stjohns.edu or the faculty sponsor Dr. Adam Clark at clarka@stjohns.edu. For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair digiuser@stjohns.edu 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, nitopim@stjohns.edu 718-990-1440.

As you are electronically signing this consent document, you will have a record of it as well as of our communication.

Agreement to Participate

Yes, I agree to have my **child** participate in the study described above. My child has provided verbal consent to both me and the researcher to participate.

Parent's Signature

Date

Yes, I agree to allow the researcher permission to **record** Zoom sessions with my child. My child has also provided verbal consent to both me and the researcher.

Parent's Signature

Date

APPENDIX J

Principal Consent Form.

Dear Principal,

Your school has been selected to be used as a site to conduct a research study to learn more about middle school students' intersectional identities, how and where they perceive Whiteness in their lives and in the literacy instruction in their classrooms, and their visions for liberatory instruction.

This study will be conducted by Scott Moore, Assistant Principal at the school and Ph. D candidate in the Department of Literacy Studies at St. John's University, as part of his doctoral dissertation work. His faculty sponsor is Dr. Adam Clark.

If you agree to allow your school and students to participate in this study, the researcher will engage three or four student participants from your school in a one-hour group interview each week. This will occur for five weeks from February to March 2021, for a total of five interviews. In between some of the interviews, participants will be asked to create an arts-based expression of their identities or their vision for liberatory instruction, or to take photos that they connect to Whiteness. Participants will upload these artifacts to a Google Classroom shared only with the small group and the researcher (Scott). The researcher and students will also spend three class periods during the fourth week identifying their perceptions of Whiteness in their literacy instruction in their Humanities classrooms, and how those perceptions made them feel. No teachers, class numbers, or other students will be named.

The five interview sessions will take place on Zoom, and they will be recorded. The recordings will be kept in a file private to the researcher and the transcriber, and destroyed after the study is complete. There are no known risks associated with your child participating in this research beyond those of everyday life.

Federal regulations require that all subjects be informed of the availability of medical treatment or financial compensation in the event of physical injury resulting from participation in the research. St. John's University cannot provide either medical treatment or financial compensation for any physical injury resulting from your participation in this research project. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board (718-990-1440). Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand the identities, perceptions, and vision of middle school students to help improve literacy instruction.

Confidentiality of the students' information and artifacts will be strictly maintained by removing their name, and any identifiers will be replaced with a pseudonym. The middle school's name is not explicitly stated in the study, though it is stated that the researcher is Assistant Principal there. Consent forms will be stored in a separate location from the interview documentation and will be kept in a secure file on the personal computer of the researcher. Participants' responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to themselves, to children, or to others. Participants' contributions to the five group interviews will be kept confidential or

anonymized by the researcher, who will encourage this of the entire group – but the researcher cannot guarantee what student participants in the group will do.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Students may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. For student documents or academic records, you may refuse access to the researcher. Nonparticipation or withdrawal will not affect students' grades or academic standing.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Scott Moore at scott.moore18@stjohns.edu or the faculty sponsor Dr. Adam Clark at clarka@stjohns.edu. For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair digiuser@stjohns.edu 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, nitopim@stjohns.edu 718-990-1440.

As you are electronically signing this consent document, you will have a record of it as well as of our communication.

Agreement to Participate

Yes, I agree to have students at my school participate in the study described above.

_____	_____
Principal Signature	Date

Yes, I agree to allow the researcher permission to **record** Zoom sessions with students.

_____	_____
Principal Signature	Date

APPENDIX K

Student Participant Permission Form.

Dear Student Participant:

You have been selected to participate in a study to learn more about middle school students' intersectional identities, how and where you perceive Whiteness in your lives and in the literacy instruction in your classrooms, and your visions for liberatory instruction.

This study will be conducted by Scott Moore, Assistant Principal at your school and Ph. D candidate in the Department of Literacy Studies at St. John's University, as part of his doctoral dissertation work. His faculty sponsor is Dr. Adam Clark.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will engage in five group interviews with Scott and three or four other middle school students in your school. You will have one group interview each week for five weeks, from February to March 2021. In between each of the weekly interviews, you will be asked to take an action step by creating something artistic or creative. For example, the first week you will use art or writing to express the different parts of your identity. Each week, you will add photos of what you create to a Google Classroom set up just for this small group and Scott. Our weekly interviews will focus on describing what you created.

We will do the interview sessions on Zoom and record them. Scott will keep the recordings private and destroy the recordings once the study is done. There are no known risks for you to participate in this research.

All materials and artifacts will be made confidential, and your name and identifying information will be removed and replaced with a pseudonym. Scott will encourage the entire group to keep shared information confidential and anonymous but cannot guarantee what other students in the group will do. The middle school's name is not stated in the study, though it is stated that Scott is Assistant Principal there. Your responses will be kept confidential, with one exception: Scott is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities any suspicion of harm to yourself or to others.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or decide to stop participating at any time. There will be no impact on your grades or academic standing.

Scott and St. John's University cannot provide you medical treatment or financial payment for this study or any injury resulting from it. You or your parent can make inquiries about this policy to Scott or to the Human Subjects Review Board (718-990-1440). Though you will receive no direct benefits, this research will help Scott understand the identities and experiences of middle school students to improve literacy instruction.

If you have any questions or wish to report a problem, you may contact Scott at scott.moore18@stjohns.edu or the faculty sponsor Dr. Adam Clark at clarka@stjohns.edu. For questions about your rights as a research participant, you and a parent may contact Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, chair of the St. John's University Institutional Review Board at digiuser@stjohns.edu or 718-990-1955.

As you are electronically signing this consent document, you will have a record of it as well as of our communication.

Agreement to Participate

Yes, I agree to participate in the study described above.

Participant's Signature

Date

Yes, I agree to allow the researcher permission to **record** Zoom sessions with me.

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX L

Researcher's Model Identity Chart, Week 1.

<i>Identity</i>	<i>My Identity</i>	<i>What I know about its history?</i>
Race	White	Dad's grandparents - Poland Mom's grandparents - Ireland Parents grew up in upstate New York, small farming town that was mostly White
Sexual Orientation	Queer	-Didn't learn much about these histories growing up -Trying to learn something now -I came out as bisexual first in high school, then learned the word "queer" in college and liked it
Gender	Transgender & non-binary (he/him or they/them)	-It's one reason why I introduce myself as Scott! I try to avoid gender binaries. -
Religion	Raised Christian	I was raised Christian by my family, but now I am not connected to a church. I went through a long process to figure out what I believe - and I am still figuring it out!
Language(s)	English	
Disability	-No learning disability (that I know of) -Anxiety & depression	-I experienced anxiety and depression starting as a young person, probably in 4th or 5th grade. I was on medication for a little while. I do not need medication any more.
Nation of Origin (or birth)	United States	
Where I grew up	Vermont	-It's a very progressive state -Very White
Job	Assistant Principal	Being at Hamilton Grange - especially working with the students - has changed my life!
Socioeconomic	Salary & health benefits	

APPENDIX M

Graphic Organizer Provided to Participants, Week 4:

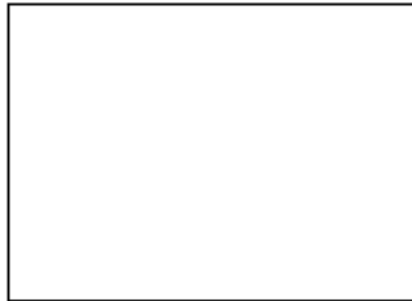
I identify as.....



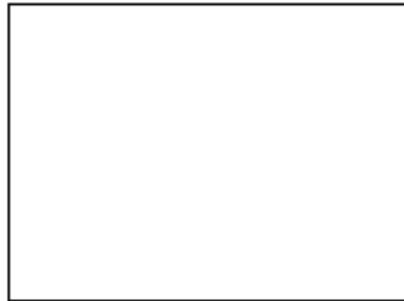
[list as many intersecting parts of your identity as you can/want]

The story of an AFFIRMING and LIBERATING Humanities lesson for someone like me:

What does it LOOK & FEEL like?



WHO is in the room? (Teachers, kids)



What kinds of things am I reading?



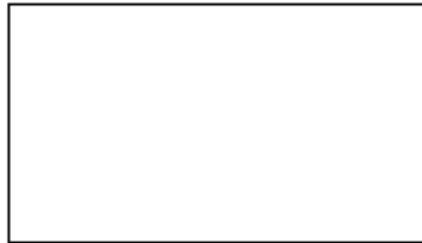
What am I learning and talking about?



What am I doing during the lesson?



Anything else?



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